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UNWILLING MARTYR

Thirty Months in German Concentration Camps

Jacques Bergman

as told to

and written by

Elizabeth Bergman





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I first met Jacques Bergman through his daughter, Ann. When she was four and I fourteen, I was an aide at her day care center. Jacques was just one of a number of parents who came to pick up the children. Several of the parents had concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. I had been taught that one didn't mention this any more than one would comment on a birthmark or a scar. In the years just after the war, no one wanted to dwell on the horrors. It was a time to rebuild and look to the future. The past would not be repeated. The Holocaust was an aberration and now we knew better.

Since then, of course, we do know better. The twentieth century may one day be known as the most brutal in history. I have now met survivors of holocausts in Cambodia, Uganda and Bosnia. "Ethnic cleansing" is going on all over the world. In some bizarre way the Nazis set an example for those all who divide humanity into "us" and "them" and feel that the best way to deal with "them" is eradication.

This is why we need to hear all of the individual stories of those who endured Nazi persecution. Not because it happened to Jews, but because it could happen to any of us.

This story was originally written in the late fifties. It





lay in a drawer for over forty years. Last year Jacques asked me to read it. To be honest, I didn't want to. Reading about such things is hard. I wasn't sure if I could handle it. But no one asked Jacques if he was prepared to handle the concentration and forced labor camps. So I took it home with me. What I read was only the bones of this book, but I was riveted. The man I know now is gentle and reserved. How could he have gone through so much with his essential decency and humanity intact? He would say that, if he hadn't, then the Nazis would have won.

This is the story of an ordinary boy. Jacques stresses that when he talks to high school students. He wasn't a hero. He didn't lead the Resistance. He wasn't interested in politics or ideology. He was a kid who liked American movies and music and wanted to be an artist. What happened to him could happen to any of us. We, too, could find ourselves suddenly turned into "them". Jacques' story reminds us of that. We have to tell it until the world understands that there is only us and all of us are essential if humanity is to survive.

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## F O R E W O R D

"Where was God; where was man?"

William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*

All of the following is true. It is the story of my experiences during thirty months' in German concentration camps. Some of the details may be blurred by time, some of the names have been forgotten, but essentially the story is as it happened. I owe a debt of gratitude to those of my friends whose letters helped fill in some of the gaps; unfortunately some of those who might have been most helpful and some of the friends who were helpful are no longer living.

Were this only my story its significance would perhaps be limited. But my experience can be multiplied thousands of times. It is the story of those millions who stood for no Cause, who were imprisoned and killed merely because their names, nationalities or religions were odious to the Nazis. They were the unwilling martyrs of World War II.

This is not a story of heroism as we are accustomed to finding in wartime anecdotes; it does not tell of brave resistance, cunning espionage or great battles. It is a story of passive endurance -- of men battling against hunger, illness, exhaustion, deprivation and time with no weapons except their minds and bodies. It is the story of how those who did survive did so-- by hoarding every scrap of mental and physical energy, by refusing to waste these precious resources on useless acts of rebellion and defiance. It is a story of discretion rather than valor; the story of a battle won by a dogged determination to outwait, outlast and outlive rather than





outfox and outfight the enemy. It therefore lacks much of the fast moving action usually found in tales of this epoch.

Much of this story was written over forty years ago, when I first wanted to make people understand what had happened to me.

But at that time there were few who wanted to listen. Perhaps it was too soon. The horror was something most people wanted to forget, like a nightmare. Now, in the half-century that has passed since World War II, many documents have been published that attest to the reality of the Holocaust. Numerous historical and psychological analyses have been published and personal memoirs have been collected. Yet now, as the last of those who endured the nightmare are dying, there are those who would deny that this horrendous event ever occurred.

Even worse, there are those who continue to close their eyes to the holocausts that are still being perpetrated throughout the world. In *The Life of Reason*, George Santyano said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The story of the Holocaust must be told, over and over, until everyone remembers and vows that it shall never happen again, to anyone, anywhere.



## Chapter One

### "Goodbye, Germany"

On December 10, 1938, Vienna's Westbahnhof was filled with the babble of several hundred children's voices, the admonitions of their parents, the clatter of luggage being moved about and the churning and hissing of the waiting steam engine. Judging from the crowd and the excited voices a bystander might have thought that he was witnessing the preparation for an excursion trip; yet there was something different about this gathering. There was an aura of strain and more than the usual farewell tears. He would have felt, too, that there was something homogenous about this group rather than the customary miscellany of people boarding an excursion train. And if he listened closely to one or the other of the conversations between parents and children he would have sensed an intensity and an urgency in their voices, as though they were trying to cram a lifetime of love and of wisdom into a few brief sentences. And all of these things which our bystander saw and heard and sensed would have been true.

For indeed this was no ordinary gathering and no ordinary parting of parents and children. These children -- ranging from infancy upward -- were boarding one of the hastily organized *Kindertransporten* that was to take them out of





Hitler's Austria to the safety of neutral Holland. The group's apparent homogeneity stemmed from the fact that all of them were Jewish and all of them had just been through nine months of Nazi occupation and tyranny. The strain, the urgency and the tears came from knowing that these children would grow up in a foreign country, among strangers, and that these parents might well never see them again.

I remember the scene well for I was one of these children. At the time I was nearly sixteen years old and could not recall ever having been away from my parents; therefore the concept of "going away" was a rather nebulous one. At the station with me were my mother and father, my Aunt Gretel and Uncle Norbert Josefsberg. My nineteen-year old brother Leo had immigrated to America a few weeks earlier to be with relatives there. The five of us presented a disconsolate picture. As far as possible we tried to hold ourselves apart from the crowd, to get away from the noise so we could talk. At the same time we discovered that the words would not come.

Standing on that bleak station platform I realized that I might never see my family again, yet none of us could bear to talk about it. We filled the time with petty small talk about writing regularly and behaving properly. For the most part we remained silent with our thoughts and our emotions.

What does a fifteen-year-old boy think about when



he is about to leave his home and his parents forever? I asked myself why it had happened at all. What had brought me here to this cold railway station? Why was I about to be packed off together with a herd of screaming youngsters to ride willy-nilly to a strange land and an unknown future? What was the panic that had gripped our country and made our parents beg to have us taken away? Where did it begin?

I was born in Vienna. My parents were Ignatz and Cecile Rothstein Bergmann. My father was a conductor on the state-owned railway and my mother a homemaker. Both of them had been born in towns in Galizia, the part of Austria-Hungary that is now the Unkkraine, but they had moved to Vienna.

We lived in the in the second district between the *Nordbahnhof* and *Nordwestbahnhof* (the North and Northwest train stations) at *Alliiertenstrasse*.<sup>6</sup> Although this was the main area in which Jews lived, my family lived in a mixed neighborhood and a mixed building. The streets were cobbled and the tram ran a block away.

There were blue collar workers and office workers, mostly Catholic. I remember a Jewish delicatessen about three blocks from our apartment. Our building was across the street from the unemployment office and each week you could see men lined up in the street to get their checks. Times were bad in the thirties in Austria and the lines were



long.

Our family lived in a one room apartment; a kitchen, living room, dining room all in one. It was a cold water flat. The toilet and the cold water faucet and the sink were all out in the hallway. We had to share the toilet, which was just a little room, with another apartment dweller who was the concierge of the apartment house. In the winter time, if you had to go to the bathroom it was cold; there was no heat in it. There was never any hot water. We had to take a pitcher outside and fill it up and then warm it up on the gas stove. For washing faces and hands we had a little basin which we filled with the heated water.

We couldn't take a bath because there was no bathtub so once a week we would go a few blocks to the bath house where there was a swimming pool and for a few Groschen you could take a shower.

My dad was employed by the Austrian railroad, which was state owned. He didn't make much money. He was the conductor of a train that went from Vienna either to Trieste or Budapest. His father had also worked for the railway and had died in an accident before I was born.

Many times I remember my father coming home with some food, like goats' milk, goat cheese, chicken, or a goose that he had bought at villages along the route. He made friends with the farmers and arranged to buy from them directly. So although we were poor,





there was always food on the table. My mother would cook the goose with all the fat and the liver and we would have a feast. My father brought home the goats' milk in big metal containers and the cream on top kept it from spoiling. We used that cream for butter. My God, when I think about it now, all those calories! No wonder at the time people just keeled over when they were in their forties. They were eating all that fat!

I thought of those meals longingly in the years to come when the food was first bad and then nonexistent.

So, my dad didn't make much money. There was not much money around for most people. Every time my mother, who handled the money, went out to buy something, that money was turned over twice before it was spent. I don't remember ever having an allowance and if my brother and I wanted to go to a movie on Saturday afternoon we had to beg for the money.

I used to like the American Westerns. It was fascinating to me to see all the cowboys and Indians. They were absolutely fascinating to me, these American movies.

I didn't know how poor we were. By today's standards we had nothing. But there was always something to eat. We rarely bought other things, though. There were times when I remember my mother making our shirts and underwear. It was a long time



before we ever went to a store to buy a shirt for my brother or myself.

We didn't even have a telephone. The only people who had telephones were lawyers and doctors.

We went to a school not very far from our home, maybe a block. The students were mostly Gentile and so were all of the teachers.

My brother Leo and I were also choirboys in the synagogue in the second district. We had to walk because we didn't have any money to take a tram. It was maybe twenty minutes from home so we walked and we made some friends going back and forth. Some of them were Christian. I didn't think much about religious differences then but Leo remembers the Monday classes in religion at our school. The students were divided into Catholic, Protestant and Jews and each group had a class in their religion. The Catholics were taught by a Jesuit who made sure his class considered Jews Christ killers. They would taunt the Jewish students after every class.

So antisemitism was already alive in Vienna long before Hitler.

I don't remember my parents ever having people over for cake or coffee. If they had friends, I never saw them. On my mother's side we had a large family. She had three sisters and three brothers. Her brothers and one sister lived in Vienna. My Uncle Emil was a watchmaker and Uncle Bernard was a furrier.



Uncle Norbert owned a candy store near the university, about a forty-minute walk from our house. So every Sunday afternoon we would walk to the candy store. He had a big back room where he would serve us coffee and maybe chocolate. Sometimes he would give us candy. We didn't have the money to buy it.

So the family would get together on Sunday and holidays and that was our entertainment.

My friends and I used to go to the Prater, which was a large and permanent amusement park. There was a huge ferris wheel there where the movie "The Third Man" was filmed. There were acrobats and comedians who gave little shows inside tents; to entice people to buy a ticket, the comedians would come outside and tell jokes. We used to go from one to the other and listen to the free entertainment.

By the time I was twelve or so I did have a little bit of money that I made from being a choir boy, but I guess I was too cheap to pay for the shows. At least we could afford to buy tickets to the soccer matches, although we had to walk to the stadium, an hour or more. Our transportation was our feet. Bicycles? Not for us; they cost money.

In the summertime, since my dad worked for the railroad, we had some free passes on the train. So each summer for two months or so we would go into the country. This was always a special occasion for us. We would pack the trunks and then, when the day came,





my dad, my brother and I would go to the taxi stand and hire a taxi and that was a very special day!

In the summer of 1936 while we were in the country, I heard that the vice-chancellor of Austria, a man named Dolfuss, had been assassinated. It was a *putsch* organized by the Austrian Nazis. At that time I didn't know much of anything about politics or government. It was shocking to me that someone could be killed because of a difference in political beliefs.

So when we came back to Vienna, I started to become more aware of the political climate. I wasn't astute about politics, but I started to hear the name 'Hitler' popping up, in the street and the newspapers. Also, my uncle had a radio so we used to listen to the news broadcasts and they would give his speeches. The only thing I can remember is that he always shouted. He never talked. He just bullied.

I became aware that in school some of my Christian friends were becoming very cool toward me. I didn't think much about it. Later on I knew why.

My father had a friend who had escaped from Germany who ate at our house sometimes. He told us about what was happening there but we didn't think it would happen in Vienna. I didn't feel any antisemitism around us. We were the only Jewish family in our building but no one ever made us feel different. Actually, my brother had a good friend, Karl Victor, from the university who



also lived in the building and used to come over to our apartment. He always seemed very nice. It wasn't until after the war that we learned that even then, when it was still illegal, he had been a member of the Nazi party.

But this was part of why those days were so confusing. Karl Victor had apparently joined the Nazi party more for self-protection than out of any belief. My Aunt Gretel said that, after Hitler had taken over Austria, Karl would come over a few times a week and take my father out for walks. With Karl's Nazi badge on, no one dared to molest my father. But this kindness may have reinforced my father's belief that he would be left alone by the new government.

So, by 1937, the political climate had become very bad. The warning rumblings of fascism had been heard in Europe as early as 1933, but like many warnings they were ignored. A complacent "it-can't-happen-here" philosophy prevailed in Austria. By early 1938, however, complacency had given way to alarm. It was already too late. The political current was sweeping fascism over Europe and Austria stood in its path. On March 11, when Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg made his famous "God save Austria" speech, Austria was already doomed.

From then on conditions became rapidly worse. Jewish families were the first to feel the grip of the new regime and suffered the most intensely from it. Jewish children were no longer permitted to attend



public schools with the pure "Aryans" and thus separate *Judenklassen* were set up for them. My father was pensioned off from the railroad because he was Jewish. "For Aryans Only" was splashed on park benches; non-Jews took to wearing swastika buttons to avoid any possibility of confusion -- and persecution -- on the streets. Columns of Hitler Youths and their auxiliary, the BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädchen) marched through the streets. Nazi flags flew from every public building.

1938 was a year of rapidly moving events. September saw the loathed Munich conference after which Mr. Chamberlain assured the world of "peace in our time." Had he been able to foresee the scene on the streets of Vienna two months after his statement, he might have been a trifle less certain that Herr Hitler's word bore real worth. The spectacle which would have greeted him certainly bore little resemblance to a peaceful time.

On November 9, 1938, the Nazis let loose a full-scale Pogrom in Vienna. Terror, persecution and deportation were the order of the day. I first became aware that something was going on as I set out in the morning to walk the customary four miles to a small studio where I was attending a class in leather tooling and handicrafts.

Since the *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria), higher education was banned to Jewish children; my parents had me enrolled in this class in order to fill



my time until some plan could be made for my safety. Leo had left for America a few weeks earlier and they were trying to find a way to get me out, too. But they felt that, whatever happened, a craft might lead to a better job opportunity in the future.

As I passed through the Jewish quarter I noticed some bedding and furniture lying in the street. In those turbulent days, signs of confusion and disorder did not mean much in themselves and I did not attach much significance to these things. On arrival at the studio, however, I realized their full meaning with startling suddenness. Windows were smashed; tables and lamps were overturned.

As soon as I walked in two SS men grabbed me, searched me and told me to line up with the rest of the class. My classmates, about twenty boys between fourteen and sixteen years of age, were huddled, frightened, against the wall. There was no sign of the teacher.

Without further explanation we were herded to a police precinct house and detained there until evening. Huddled together in a corner we watched hundreds of Jewish men being brought into the station and registered for deportation to concentration camps. In our terror we failed to note that no one bothered to register us -- an indication that we would probably be released.

Toward the evening when the precinct house became





too full we were moved to the downtown *Polizeigebäude* (police station) where we were held until midnight. All this time we were given no food and had no inkling of what was to become of us. No one had notified our parents of our whereabouts; indeed we did not even know if our own families had been rounded up and deported in the meantime. At midnight we were released and told to go home.

That November evening was a grim foretelling of many cold and lonely nights I was yet to experience. Although I was exhausted, hungry and frightened I set out on foot -- I had no money for carfare -- for home. Knowing that I might bump into an SS or SA man at anytime and be questioned as to why I was out alone at night (and possibly be jailed again) did not make the trip any more comfortable. As a precaution I avoided all groups of people. I felt like a thief with something to hide, dodging my way through the back streets and alleys of nighttime Vienna. Frankly, I ran as fast as I could. Luck was with me and I arrived at home without incident. But how was I to get into the house? We lived in an apartment and apartment houses were locked at night from the inside. Banging on the door would have aroused the *Hausmeister* (concierge) -- who was a Nazi -- and I could hardly expect a rousing welcome from him in the middle of the night.

Finally I picked up some pebbles in the street and tossed them against our window -- we lived on the



first floor -- until my father appeared and let me in.

"What happened to you? Where have you been? What have you seen?" My parents asked. We talked far into the night while I told my parents all that happened to me and they in turn informed me of the full scope of the pogrom.

Apparently the pogrom had been directed primarily at picking up Jewish men for deportation to concentration camps. My father had escaped only by hiding in a storage locker in the cellar. My mother had been afraid to leave the house but my Aunt Gretel, who did not look Jewish, had gone to look for me. Because I was never registered she was unable to locate me although she went from police station to police station.

Having been incarcerated for the entire day I had not been aware of the full scope of the pogrom. I learned that the men whom I had seen in the police station had been rounded up by the SS, lined up in columns and forced to march through the streets crying, "I am a dirty Jew!". Orthodox Jews were dragged through the streets by their beards. Elderly people were compelled to do calisthenics on the streets. SS men painted the words "Dirty Jew" on the sidewalk with enamel paint, then gave Jewish men tooth brushes and cold water to clean it off. Synagogues were sacked and Jewish business buildings were burned. A mass bonfire consumed many holy documents and books



by Jewish authors.

Although my father escaped deportation at this time, one of my uncles was taken and sent to a concentration camp, Dachau. His wife and their three-year old daughter were left behind. Several weeks later he was released, as well as many others deported at the time of the pogrom. He returned to Vienna only to learn that his wife had suffered a breakdown after his arrest and killed herself by jumping out of a fourth story window, as her three-year old daughter watched. Being a Polish citizen he was not allowed to remain in Vienna. Entrusting his little daughter to my parents he left for Poland where he presumably met his death a short time later. After my departure for Holland on the *Kindertransport*, my parents were able to get my cousin to Sweden where she was adopted and raised by a kind Swedish couple. We never saw her again. I learned later that she had become a psychiatrist in Stockholm but has no interest in contacting her Jewish relatives.

Immediately after the pogrom the *Jüdische Kultusgemeinde* (the civil authority in charge of Jewish records) began organizing transports to get the Jewish children out of Vienna. Only a few of these transports were able to get out before the Nazis put a stop to them. Those that did get through carried hundreds of youngsters to England and Holland where hastily organized refugee committees prepared to re-





ceive them.

My parents had hoped to get both Leo and me to America to ride out the coming war with my father's brother, Max, who lived in New York. There were quotas on both sides of the Atlantic, however, and Leo already had a number from the American embassy which permitted him to immigrate. My parents were afraid that, because of his age, he would be drafted into the army, where I was too young and on the *Kindertransport*. Ironically, he was drafted - into the American army although he wasn't yet a citizen and hadn't learned more than a little English. He was employed as a topographer, working in the photo lab, and was eventually sent to Guam. As part of his job he developed the first pictures of Hiroshima after the bombing.

Soon after Leo left, my parents put me on the list for the *Kindertransport*. They never said anything about leaving themselves. They had no money and no place to go. As I said, my father believed that, since he was a state pensioner, he would be left alone. They were more worried about keeping Leo and me safe.

Therefore, one month and one day after the pogrom I was boarding the train for Holland. My parents would have preferred a transport to England --it was considered a "safer" country --but did not dare risk the wait for a vacancy. Finally the time for



departure came. A quick kiss, a handshake, a few tears that would not stay back, a reminder to write home as well as to my brother in America -- and I was off. I had with me on my flight to the Ausland one suitcase containing my clothes, an address book, a sketchbook and some pencils -- and a box lunch. As far as I can remember I had no money.

Once on the train I turned quickly to the business of getting acquainted with my fellow passengers. I was fortunate that two of my compartment-mates were the Basch brothers with whom I had gone to school. We spent a great deal of time reminiscing about the past and wondering about the future.

The trip passed quickly; with so many of us crowded on the hard benches of the train we did not get much sleep but we arrived in The Hague on the following day not much the worse for wear. Ironically as we crossed the border into Holland we shouted, "Good-bye, Germany!" We were still naive enough to think that we were leaving Germany and the Nazis behind.

Up to this time Holland had been merely a subject in a geography class and a spot on the map to me and I was eager to really see the country. For the first six months of my stay in Holland, however, I saw very little of it. In The Hague we were loaded into several buses and taken to Rotterdam where we were



temporarily quartered in a "quarantine camp." This camp had been originally set up as a receiving center for passengers from incoming ships carrying a contagious disease. We remained in our temporary quarters for about six months while the Dutch citizenry went about the business of organizing suitable quarters for this sudden and overwhelming influx of refugees

Much of the credit for the work that was done in those years goes to a group of people who operated under the title of *Vluchteling Comité* (refugee committee). Just prior to the arrival of the first *Kindertransport* this group of resourceful volunteers, hastily but efficiently organized, collected 1,000,000 guilders for the organization and staffing of children's homes. They maintained the quarantine camp as an emergency receiving station. I was to be a "guest" of the *Vluchteling Comité* for the next four years.

One of the guiding lights of the committee was Mevrouw A.H.Moll -- a tireless, generous, kindhearted woman who then was approaching sixty years of age. Like many other members of the committee Mevrouw Moll was not Jewish herself; yet she espoused the cause of the refugees as though it were her own. She took a genuine and personal interest in each youngster who came under her wing. She had the energy of a woman half her age and continued her work in behalf of the



young refugees whom she befriended not only through the war years -- when she helped many of them go underground -- but long after. In spite of my many years' acquaintance with Mevrouw Moll I know little of her family and nothing of her background; she did not wish praise or recognition for her fine work and those of us who were privileged to know her have respected her wishes during her lifetime.

As soon as suitable housing had been found we were moved out of the quarantine camp into a large building -- actually a converted unemployment office - - in Rotterdam. I was not sorry to leave the quarantine camp behind. We had been joined there by several transports of adult refugees and conditions had become quite crowded. There was no organized activity in the camp; no one knew how long we were to remain there and thus no formal schooling or long range projects were begun. We spent our days completing the usual routine of housekeeping chores, reading all we could get and waiting.

Our new home, located on Rotterdam's Hoogstraat in the heart of the business district, was an old rambling two story building. Because of its age it was permeated with a musty odor that no amount of scrubbing would cure. The home was staffed entirely by trained nurses and sheltered over one hundred children -- from infancy to eighteen years of age. Sleeping quarters were on the second floor, with an average of





six or eight beds to a room. The first floor was converted into a huge dining hall. Due to a lack of kitchen facilities all the food was catered in.

Soon after our arrival the very young babies were moved elsewhere as their care proved too much for the limited staff of the Home. Still the wide age-range of the remaining children and the inadequate number of staff members made conditions in the Home rather trying. For example, all of us, regardless of age, were treated exactly alike. Even the teenagers were not allowed out alone; our outings consisted of group tours to the parks, the tulip fields and occasional movies.

Things improved somewhat a little later when the *Vluchteling Comité* found jobs for the older inhabitants of the Home -- fourteen and up. Of course we were too young to work legally and thus our jobs were a kind of unpaid apprenticeship; although not financially remunerative they certainly provided us with valuable experience.

I was asked by a lady from the Comité what I would like to do and replied, "I have always wanted to be a textile designer." It was a dream I never hoped to realize but she promptly found me a job in the largest oriental rug factory in Holland -- the *Koninklijke Vereenigde Tapijtfabrieken* (*Royal Amalgamated Carpet Factory*)-- as a designer! I worked there approximately ten months --from July 1939 until



the bombing of Rotterdam in May 1940-- and learned a great deal.

After we had begun working and thus proved to the staff of the Home that we were reasonable young people, we were even allowed an occasional Saturday night "on the town." Rotterdam was fascinating to me. The city had the biggest cargo port of Europe. At the port there was much commercial shipping and everything that goes with it: sailors, merchant mariners, taverns, dark alleys, red light districts, prostitutes. We were not allowed to go near the port but we did. "There is no harm in looking," we told ourselves. We imagined intrigue, being shanghaied by sinister men to far away places. In our romantic fantasies we never considered what being captured and put into forced labor might really be like.

Apart from the exotic wharf area, Rotterdam also had many charming little coffee houses where groups of musicians played German, Austrian and Hungarian music until the wee hours. Price of admission was one cup of coffee over which one could linger indefinitely.

In those days, however, the price of a cup of coffee could be a major obstacle to a pleasant evening. We had almost no spending money. I received a little money now and then from my parents and from my brother but it was spent almost as soon as it was received on cigarettes and other essentials that the Home did not provide. Most of my friends were in the



same predicament.

On one particular Saturday night in the fall of 1939 a group of us, hungering for the sound of familiar music, put our heads together to derive some sort of plan for obtaining the admission price. Fortunately we had among us a budding financial genius -- a young Berliner named Fischel. He asked us all for our return coupons -- these were coupons sent to us by our parents, which were redeemable at the post office for stamps -- and then disappeared. About half an hour later he was back, grinning broadly, and jingling a handful of coins.

We were too astounded and grateful for his ingenuity to ask him his secret. Evidently he had sold the coupons, either to the postmaster or to someone else whom he could convince of their value; in any case we now had enough money to spend three glorious hours listening to the music, which meant "home" to us

Our only other sources of entertainment were the movies which were provided free once a week to the inhabitants of the Home by the local theater owners. Most of the films were American, English and French with Dutch subtitles. In those months I must have seen every Jeannette McDonald - Nelson Eddy musical ever filmed, plus numerous Danielle Darieux movies as well as Walt Disney's Snow White. Besides providing excellent entertainment these movies also served a useful purpose; they helped us to learn Dutch. None of





us ever had formal schooling in the Dutch language, yet by the end of our first six months in the Home we had assimilated enough Dutch (dirty words first) through the people with whom we came in contact, the radio and movies, to hold our own with the native population.

In the spring of 1940 we moved again -- this time to permanent quarters, or so we thought. The Rotterdam *Jongenstehuis* was finally ready for us. In the latter part of February we were segregated; the girls who had been with us were sent to the *Huis ten Vrouwen* in The Hague and the boys -- about sixty of us ranging in age from thirteen to eighteen years -- started the newly founded *Jongenstehuis*.

The *Jongenstehuis* was the first home built -- or rather-re-built -- especially for a children's home. Whereas both the quarantine camp and the Hoogstraat Home were used pretty much as they were originally, the *Jongenstehuis* was planned by people who knew the needs of such a home and, as far as limited resources permitted, these needs were met. The actual building, originally a duplex, was turned over to the committee by its owner who had fled to America. It was a large, two-story brick building roomy enough to be readily adapted for our use. The dining room, kitchen and staff quarters were on the first floor, our bedrooms and a huge washroom on the second floor.

In addition to improved physical facilities, the



establishment of the *Jongenstehuis* meant another big change in our lives. For the first time since our emigration we were entrusted to the care of a professional staff whose training and personalities qualified them to assume supervision of such a large group of adolescent boys. The *Jongenstehuis* was staffed with a physician director, a social worker, secretary, a cook and a trained nurse.

Zuster Van Gelderen, the nurse, had been part of the staff of the Hoogstraat Home; she was the only staff member who was Dutch. Freda Leib, the cook, was a German refugee, Miss Sussman, the secretary, was from Vienna and Dr. Wolff, our director, came to Holland from his native Germany. The leadership of the *Jongenstehuis* really rested in the hands of Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman; because of this, these two people had a profound effect on my life.

Dr. S. Wolff, a pediatrician and former head of a children's hospital in Eisenach, Germany, had been forced to flee his homeland during the Nazi purge of 1939. When he was brought before the Nazi authorities he was already so weakened from the persecution he had suffered that he seemed more dead than alive. He was let go under orders to leave Germany immediately. Taking with him only a few clothes and very important documents, he crossed the border to Holland. In Holland he was given the name of a family who sheltered him for a time; later he was awarded the



directorship of the *Jongenstehuis*.

Although physically unimposing -- he was barely five feet tall, slightly hunchbacked, with large prominent ears and a rapidly receding hairline -- Dr. Wolff nevertheless commanded respect wherever he went. It was not necessary to know him well to realize that here was a man who had not only tremendous intellectual powers but real warmth, kindness and generosity. Above all he loved children and young people. His own family had been lost to him; he was divorced and childless. His only living relatives were his elderly mother who had been deported to Theresienstadt, a sister, who along with her daughter had been sent to Poland and a nephew, a talented musician, who had been sent to safety in Israel.

I always felt in some measure the boys (and later the girls) of the *Jongenstehuis* satisfied Dr. Wolff's need for a family. Certainly he devoted the last years of his life to us. Aiding Dr. Wolff in his efforts was dark-haired, petite and vivacious Hedi Sussman. A former social worker from Vienna, Miss Sussman came to Holland shortly after the Anschluss in 1938. For a time she lived with her sister and brother-in-law who had been in Holland since 1931 and worked as an extern in various children's homes. In 1939 she joined the *Dommelhaus* in Eindhoven -- a home for boys -- and remained there until it was decided to move the home farther away from the German border. The Rotterdam



*Jongenstehuis* was a combination of the Eindhoven home and part of the Hoogstraat home. Despite many obstacles in the path of its creation, the *Jongenstehuis* had a grand opening that was second to none. Its official opening in March 1940 coincided with the Jewish festival of Passover -- a truly symbolic celebration. Among the dignitaries present was the president of the children's division of the *Joodse Raad* (Jewish Council), who had been most helpful in getting the home established. Tables were decked with flowers and an excellent meal was served. For the moment at least it seemed that all was going right with our world.





## CHAPTER II

### Bombardment of Rotterdam

Our peaceful existence did not last long, however. Two brief months after the joyous opening ceremonies of the *Jongenstehuis*, Holland was at war. On May 10, 1940, Hitler invaded Holland. Bombs fell on the Rotterdam airport and at other strategic points. Nazi paratroopers landed behind defense lines, Dutch marines engaged in ground fighting everywhere. The Dutch people remained firm. They would not be conquered; their army and their "water line" (a defense line) would protect them. They would not surrender.

For five days and nights we kept a twenty-four hour watch around the radio waiting for news and instructions. We could not participate in our customary activities as we had suddenly been confined to quarters. From "refugees" we were reclassified as "enemy aliens" as soon as the first German bombs dropped on Holland.

On May 14, Hitler issued an ultimatum. "Surrender or we will bomb Rotterdam." The Dutch refused. The following morning, as I was relieved from my shift at the radio, we heard planes overhead. A group of us went outside to see what was going on. Everywhere people were standing outside their houses looking upward at the sky now covered with German bombers.

"What does it mean?"

"What does the radio say?"



"What about the water line?"

"Ah, they just flew over our water line."

"Well, where are they going?"

These questions were on everyone's lips; the answers came much too soon. While the inhabitants of Rotterdam were talking in the streets, sitting in their homes, working in their shops and offices, the bombardment of their city had already begun. There were no warnings of any kind — no air raid signals, no safety measures. Not until the bombs actually began to drop did Rotterdam know it was being attacked.

It took a few minutes for the shock to wear off before we realized that the planes were not passing over but were actually dropping bombs on the city. We were still standing outside watching in horror and fascination when Dr. Wolff called us in and made us all lie down on the floor of the dining hall with our hands over our heads to wait until the attack was over. We lay there for one hour listening to the bombs drop and feeling the house shake like a matchbox in a strong wind.

Although we were allowed, even encouraged, to talk, not a word passed among us in that hour. Lying there, every muscle tensed, expecting each breath to be the last, petty things suddenly took on a tremendous importance. I nearly panicked at the thought of losing all my personal possessions, my only suit, my best boots, the pictures of my family. 'If a bomb drops, they will be destroyed' I thought, not thinking that if a bomb had dropped I would hardly have had any use for them. It was all I could do to keep from running upstairs to rescue my



precious things.

To take my mind off the possible loss of these articles I turned my thoughts to my family. I did not waste my time in idle speculation of the possibility of a reunion with them; rather I recalled scenes from the past, from my earliest childhood until I left home. It was as though I were critically reviewing a movie of my life, suggesting a few changes and corrections here and there, but basically finding that it had been good, much more than I had realized.

Gradually the bombing ceased; the drone of the engines fading off into the distance. The attack was over; the murderers had done their work and were going home. Half-eager, half-afraid we went outside to survey the damage. What greeted us was a scene as unreal as a picture-postcard sunset. The fire had turned the sky a smoky grey-orange. The dark outlines of the building were silhouetted sharply against this background and white clouds behind it drifting off. What a picture! 'I am going to paint this,' I thought absently. In another minute I would have dashed upstairs for my paints and brushes. Even with the terrors of *Kristallnacht* and the bombing the war wasn't completely real to me yet.

But Dr. Wolff broke sharply into my reverie. Quickly he began organizing us into teams to prepare for evacuation. The entire downtown section of Rotterdam was in flames; thousands were already dead, hundreds more would probably lose their lives in the fire. The *Jongenstehuis*, although fortunately located on the outskirts of the city, was separated from the fire only by a small canal. The former Hoogstraat home where we



had lived until recently had been leveled by bombs.

We had to be ready to leave and leave quickly before the fire swept out of control. We began throwing all unbreakable items out of the windows and stacking our possession in neat piles on the lawn, ready to take off at a moment's notice. As we worked we saw a small pitiful band of Dutch soldiers retreating through the streets carrying a white flag of surrender. (Hand fighting had taken place just outside the city in a desperate attempt to defend Rotterdam but was soon over.) They added the final touch of pathos to the heartbreaking picture before us.

Efficient fire-fighting and good weather combined to control the fire and we did not have to evacuate. But Holland was beaten. In a farewell speech on the radio Queen Wilhelmina closed with these words,

"Nederland zal herrijzen!" (Holland will rise again!)

It was not long before that I had heard the abdication of the Austrian Chancellor. And it was not long before we again felt the crush of the Nazi tyrant whom we thought we had left behind on the German-Dutch border two years earlier.

Registration, deportation and evacuation began immediately. We knew that our time in Rotterdam was limited but we did not know when or how we would have to go. A month after the invasion the Germans issued a proclamation stating that all Jews must leave the seacoast towns; in September we received word that we must vacate the *Jongenstehuis* within twenty-four hours. While we packed our belongings in frantic haste, Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman made numerous telephone calls to try and locate a place





where we could go. Finally we set out for Wolkenland, a former youth hostelry in the Dutch province of Gelderland, which had been donated to us by one of the directors of the Amsterdam "Lyceum." Wolkenland was nothing more than a large inn; the nearest town, Achterhoek, was about two miles away. There we were joined by a group of girls from a girls' home, the *Huis ten Vrouwer*, which had been established simultaneously with the *Jongenstehuis*. Although we were a trifle cramped for space, we had managed to settle in quite nicely when, only a week after our arrival, we were informed that we would have to leave Wolkenland within three hours; it was to be occupied by German soldiers.

Within three hours we had again packed our belongings and were on our way. Some of the girls were quartered in Achterhoek with various families; the rest of us wandered about Holland looking for a place to stay. It took at least a month before we got to Arnhem. We went from synagogue to synagogue. We only stayed in group homes, not with Christians. We slept in school buildings sometimes, wherever space could be found for us.

Finally we were given a large, dilapidated building, which originally had been part of the estate of the Queen Mother. Later, it was owned by a baroness who hadn't lived in it for years. We rebuilt it as best we could with the very limited means at our disposal into another *Jongenstehuis*.

We remained in Arnhem from October 1940 until December 1942.

I liked Arnhem from the first. It was, and probably still is, a city of beautiful parks, fine homes and stately public



buildings.

The inhabitants, about 100,000 of them, were openhearted, friendly, generous people who made us feel at home immediately. Structurally the Arnhem *Jongenstehuis* resembled the one in Rotterdam although it was much larger. The first floor served as cooking, eating and recreation space, the second floor contained the offices and staff quarters and the third floor was occupied by dormitory rooms. A divided stairway led to the sleeping quarters since the Arnhem *Jongenstehuis* housed not only the boys from Rotterdam but also an approximately even number of girls.

Zuster van Cleef, another nurse, came to us as girls' counselor. She was an intelligent, warm hearted young woman but had considerable difficulty becoming adjusted to the "foreign" youngsters in the home. She worked hard, spoiled the girls at every opportunity but received little recognition from them. Zuster van Cleef was a nice person. I don't know why the girls didn't like her. Maybe they thought she was too bossy.

Zuster van Cleef conducted various classes for girls while the two *Jugendleiter*, Herr Locker and Dr. Felsenthal, attempted to guide the education of the boys. These projects did not meet with much success; since all of us worked during the day, we had only evenings for classes. Many projects were begun in these evening sessions but few were ever completed due to lack of time and real interest.

Herr Locker had been a teacher somewhere in Germany and came to Holland with his family, his wife, a son then about four years old and a daughter about seven. He did not live in the



home but spent most of his time there. On Friday evening when he conducted the Sabbath services his family would join us. Herr Locker's primary function was the supervision of religious activities in the home. This included the organization of services for all the holidays and directing the menu planning to make certain that it followed the Jewish dietary law. Since most of us didn't come from observant homes, this wasn't as important to us as it was to Herr Locker. My parents had two sets of dishes for Passover but did not keep kosher otherwise.

Later when the cuisine at the *Jongenstehuis* deteriorated appreciably we attempted to persuade Dr. Wolff to scrap Herr Locker's kosher cookery in order so that we might obtain meat, such as pork, which was at least cheap. Dr. Wolff, however, was never willing to consider this heretical act and Herr Locker would have been horrified if he had. By and large, Herr Locker was not well liked. He was a nervous, ineffectual person, extremely preoccupied with himself and his family. His personality was hardly suited to functioning as a leader for adolescent boys and girls.

Dr. Felsenthal, a former attorney, had barely escaped from Germany. When he joined the *Jongenstehuis* staff, he was extremely uneasy for fear that the German authorities would recognize him and arrest him. For a time he even toyed with the idea of changing his name. His wife and two sons were living somewhere in Holland but I never saw them at the *Jongenstehuis*. Dr. Felsenthal, an avowed intellectual, organized various classes in English literature—I remember particularly several readings of Shaw's plays—and French. The classes were always



well attended for the first few sessions but gradually grew smaller and smaller; his attempts to create organized activity and recreation for us usually ended in frustration. He was an intense and earnest young man but he lacked the gift of conveying his enthusiasm for learning to others.

The Arnhem *Jongenstehuis* was largely supported by its children. All but very few held full-time outside jobs. Here we were paid directly by our employers and turned most of this money over to the *Jongenstehuis* to cover its operating expenses. A little was kept out for spending money. Later, when the food became worse, almost all of this money went for fruit and cigarettes. Some days I bought and ate several pounds of fresh fruit and avoided the *Jongenstehuis* dining hall altogether.

I was fortunate in that I was allowed to pursue my interest in art of all kinds. During the day I was employed in a small studio making figurines and other objet d'art. The owner of the shop, Mrs. Thieme, was a fine, gracious woman who took a real interest in the young refugees suddenly loosened in her country. At night I attended art classes, paid for by the *Vluchteling Comité*. Thus my routine was a pleasant one; had it not been for the ever-increasing restrictions governing the lives of all Jews since the Nazi invasion and the ever-present threat of deportation, life in Arnhem could have been quite agreeable.

Restrictions on the personal freedom of all Jews, whether native Hollanders or refugees, began almost immediately after the German invasion and affected all of us. Registration of all Dutch people with the German police was compulsory. Bicycles were confiscated. Radio broadcasts and newspapers were





controlled by the Nazis. It was forbidden to listen to overseas radio broadcasting, such as the BBC or Radio Free Europe. SS-Seyss-Inquart, which had been Gauleiter of Vienna after the *Anschluss*, became Gauleiter of Holland.

The plundering of Holland started.

Our vital statistics, complete with fingerprints and current addresses were on file with the Gestapo in preparation for eventual deportation. On the street we all had to wear a large yellow Star of David with the word *Jood* written on it. Often this badge in itself spelled deportation. In Holland, too, the Gestapo picked up people on the streets and in public places; the yellow badges made it easy for them to know just whom they wanted. I felt vulnerable and afraid whenever I had to go out with mine on.

There was no real protection against abduction of this kind but it helped to be as inconspicuous as possible. In those days my customary street garb was all black – black pants, black boots, black jacket. I clutched a large briefcase over the yellow star and ducked through side streets and alleys on my way to and from work.

Although the Nazis had set themselves a deadline for purging Holland of all its 115,000 Jews, they were frustrated in their efforts by the well-organized resistance of the Dutch people themselves. Non-Jews began wearing the yellow stars as a sign of sympathy. They hid their Jewish friends and procured food and clothing for them. When the mass deportation began it was not uncommon to see Jews accompanied to the transport trains by their non-Jewish friends who were carrying their luggage and



weeping.

Finally the Nazis became so annoyed that they issued a proclamation stating that all Jewish "sympathizers" would be treated the same as Jews and would be punished by imprisonment, deportation or death.

The resistance continued but less openly and thus the Dutch underground was born. They devoted themselves largely to procuring false identification cards and rationing cards for Jews who were in hiding (a very vital function if they were to continue eating) and to counter-acting the effects of Nazi propaganda. Nazi proclamations were everywhere. They were aimed primarily at getting labor for the German war effort.

"Workers wanted in Germany. Good wages. Plentiful food. Join now. Go as a volunteer."

The underground immediately put out newspapers warning against paying any attention to these proclamations since they were merely an attempt at obtaining slave labor voluntarily. When the proclamations failed to produce a sufficient number of "volunteers" the Nazis ordered that all men in Holland, whether Dutch or German, Jewish or non-Jewish, must report to an employment exchange if they were not already in the service of the Nazis. The underground destroyed, falsified and so utterly confused existing population records as to render them almost useless. The resulting delay in setting up adequate records helped many to escape

Restrictions continued to grow tighter. Movies, cafés and restaurants bore signs, "No Jews Allowed." Jews were not allowed to use public transportation or to visit their non-Jewish



friends. Jews could no longer work for non-Jews or have non-Jewish servants in their homes. They could not hold jobs in stores, factories, or government offices. Jews must do their shopping after three o'clock and must be off the streets by eight.

Naturally all those restrictions meant that we were spending more and more time within the four walls of the *Jongenstehuis* itself. It was during this turbulent time that we really began to know each other and to become good friends. We began to see more of Dr. Wolff also, not always entirely voluntarily. He usually appeared on the scene when we were doing something forbidden, but he was never mellow or more inclined to talk than when he had just given us a good scolding. In this connection I particularly remember our Friday evening record sessions.

Since the *Jongenstehuis* adhered strictly to Jewish law, there was to be no reading, writing or entertainment of any sort after the Friday evening religious service. Thus we all retired to our rooms early. But Friday night was also the end of the working week and we were usually in the mood for a party. Thus my six roommates, Heinz Fischel, his younger cousin, Manfred, Werner Levy, Werner Strauss, Hans Strauss (who was no relation to Werner), Arthur W. and I devised a system for holding illegal but nevertheless enjoyable parties in our room after the Friday night "lights out."

One of the boys had an old phonograph; among the seven of us we had managed to lay in a pretty good collection of modern (mostly American) jazz and some classical records. Cigarettes



were always available although smoking in our rooms was strictly forbidden. We muffled the phonograph with a few towels, turned out the lights, lit our cigarettes and settled back for a good bull session.

Conversation centered largely on our past and our future. We were a catholic group; our only common bond was the present. Heinz, whose left side was partially crippled from a birth injury, was a quiet subdued youth who took a great deal of ribbing, both good-natured and otherwise, particularly from his cousin, Manfred. Because of his handicap, Heinz was unable to hold a regular job and thus did odd jobs around the *Jongenstehuis*. Manfred, the youngest member of the group by about three years, was the exact opposite of his cousin. He was a radio technician, proud of his skill, loquacious, and not always pleasant to have around.

Both boys' families were in Shanghai except Manfred's brother who was already interred at Westerbork. The visas for the families had come through after the boys left for Holland and it had been impossible for them to rejoin their parents.

Werner Levy was an artist and quite talented. His mother was in England and he hoped to join her there. Werner was a bit eccentric at times and made a real effort to be "Bohemian." The two Strauss boys, both machinists by trade, were easygoing, good-natured and friendly. They often preserved the group's equilibrium. Arthur W. was a pleasant, intelligent youth, whose frequent illnesses prevented him from holding a regular job but did nothing to dim his good spirits. Heinz, Manfred and Arthur were originally from Berlin, the others came from various parts





of Germany; I was the only Austrian.

Invariably our parties would just be well on their way when the smell of smoke would draw Dr. Wolff's attention. Slowly he would climb the stairs and go directly to our room where he would be greeted by the glow of seven cigarettes and the muffled strains of Glenn Miller's "String of Pearls." Patiently we listened to all the reasons why we should not break the Sabbath and why we must never smoke in our rooms. Obediently we put out our cigarettes and put away the record player. But when Dr. Wolff turned to go back downstairs one of the boys would casually ask him a question.

"Do you think the Germans will make us move?"

"How long is this war going to last?"

"Will we have to leave Holland?"

It did not matter what the question was as long it served its purpose, to start a conversation. Often we would talk far into the night. We loved listening to Dr. Wolff in spite of his extremely pessimistic outlook.

"This war will last fifteen years, you will see," he would say. "Hitler wants all of Europe. America will have to enter the war before it is over."

He held out no hope for his own survival although he was certain that we would come out all right. He was extremely proud of his "boys and girls" and confident that we would all "reach our goals."

All our entertainment was not confined to the secrecy of our rooms, however. After movie theaters and cafes were closed to us, we began having regular and organized entertainment in



the *Jongenstehuis*. Because of the curfew I had to give up my evening art classes and thus had a great deal of time on my hands. I became an active participant in the *Jongenstehuis'* *Bunte Abende*. These "colorful evenings" were usually on Saturday nights and were mighty colorful indeed since most of the scripts were original efforts by members of the *Jongenstehuis* staff. I wrote and directed a two-act play called "Now and Then"—the story of an orthodox Polish family twenty years earlier and at the present time. It was written in a humorous, slightly satirical vein and amused everyone except Herr Locker who informed me that I had no right to "ridicule" orthodoxy.

"Blackouts"—a series of unrelated humorous anecdotes - usually loaded with timely and strictly "local" jokes - was another of our favorite forms of entertainment. These gave everyone a chance to try his hand at acting, writing and directing and thus were very popular. In cooperation with Dr. Felsenthal I also attempted to organize a mixed choir. We had a number of very good voices in the *Jongenstehuis* and a piano to lend accompaniment. Although the choir went well for a while, we could not sustain interest in it and it gradually went the way of Dr. Felsenthal's Shavian readings.

Only once did any of us try to crash the Nazi barrier and attend an "outside" function. Actually this idea was promoted by my employer, Mrs. Thieme. She invited me and a girl from the *Jongenstehuis*, Lisl Zuckerbäcker, to attend a production of Franz Lehar's operetta, *Land des Lächelns*. These productions were one of the cultural projects sponsored by the Nazis and heavily attended by Gestapo and Wehrmacht personnel. Lisl and I



protested that we could not go! But Mrs. Thieme remained firm.

"Young people should have fun," she maintained. "It will be all right."

It was a foolish thing to do but finally we agreed.

On the evening of the performance Lisl and I slipped out of the *Jongenstehuis* unnoticed and hurried to the studio where Mrs. Thieme removed the yellow stars from our clothes. Otherwise we were in no way disguised and the three of us marched into Arnhem's erstwhile "public" auditorium without so much as a second glance at the big sign that clearly announced, "No Jews Allowed."

Although *Land des Lächelns* was and is one of my favorite operettas I remember little of that performance. Lisl and I spent most of the time watching the German police force in the audience and relatively little time observing the performance on the stage. After the performance Mrs. Thieme sewed the yellow stars back on our clothes and we stole back to the *Jongenstehuis* without incident.

Although our presence at the auditorium had caused no notice there, our absence from the *Jongenstehuis* had received no small amount of attention. When roll call found two of us missing Dr. Wolff flew into a fury that was half anger and half fear. When Lisl and I arrived home, unharmed and by then quite amused at our own cleverness, his wrath descended on us full force.

"How could you have done a thing like that?" he cried when he heard where we had been.

He went on at some length, lecturing us on the risk of



being out after curfew, of being caught at a forbidden performance, of jeopardizing the safety of the entire home. By the time he was through he had given voice to all the misgivings we had originally felt about our great adventure and we were honestly subdued and penitent. We apologized and although we pointed out that nothing had happened after all, we never tried it again. Thinking back on that, I can only say that I must have been crazy to try such a thing. Poor Dr. Wolff must have had a hell of a time keeping all those teenage boys in line. And it was one of us who caused the group our greatest danger.

But it was fortunate that we did have these moments of fun and fantasy for reality was closing in on us.

The first blow fell in early 1942, on an otherwise uneventful Saturday afternoon. A group from the *Jongenstehuis* habitually went swimming (we were still allowed to use a public place) in Arnhem's *Sportfondsenbad* on Saturday under the supervision of Zuster van Cleef. I did not swim; therefore I was not at the *Sportfondsenbad* when my roommate, Arthur W. committed the unprecedented and, as it turned out later, fatal error.

Arthur had been suffering from a rash on his arm and therefore was not allowed to participate in the swimming. After the others left, however, he became restless and wandered down to the *Sportfondsenbad* to watch the swimmers.

A short time later, the rest of the group had just barely returned from their swimming, Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman were called to the door where two policemen waited to speak to them. A bit apprehensive, since dealings with the police generally meant trouble in those days, they nevertheless attempted to





answer their questions as accurately as possible although they failed to understand their meaning. They were asked their respective positions in the home, the number of boys, the number of girls, the kind of supervision exercised over these youngsters, the way they spend their free time, etc.

Finally the police said, "You have reserved the *Sportfondsenbad* for a weekly two-hour period during which the youngsters can swim with proper supervision."

They admitted to this, still puzzled.

"You were there today also." The policeman said. " Who was there as supervisor?"

Zuster van Cleef was called. The policeman challenged her at once.

"Is there a boy in this home who wears a blue coat and a white scarf? He did not participate in the swimming but he was also at the *Sportfondsenbad*. How is it possible that he came and went alone?"

Zuster van Cleef admitted that Arthur, who could not swim because of his arm, was watching from the spectators' gallery but at some point he had disappeared and she could not find him again until after the swimming period was over.

Arthur was called down, asked to bring his coat and scarf and put them on. He fit the description. Dr. Wolff asked him how he happened to be in the *Sportfondsenbad* when he had been expressly forbidden to go since he couldn't go in the pool. Arthur replied that he only wanted to watch. The policemen asked him if he had seen a soldier's coat hanging in the gallery and had removed a revolver from the pocket.



Arthur replied "No!"

Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman protested that Arthur would be incapable of such a dishonest and foolish act.

The policemen, they were from the Dutch police, very proper and courteous, smiled sympathetically but replied, "All parents say, 'My child couldn't have done that,' but experience tells us otherwise."

They left, taking Arthur with them, but promising to return him as soon as he had been questioned.

We had just sat down to dinner when Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman were again called to the door. The two policemen had brought Arthur back in handcuffs. They took him immediately to our room, went through his suitcase and all his belongings. Finally, either through threats or warnings, they elicited from Arthur the admission that he had taken the revolver and hidden it in the garden. Arthur indicated the spot; the revolver was found. Now there was no turning back. The soldier, a German, had reported the theft of the revolver and the police had to turn Arthur over to the SS. Although he was only seventeen, he was imprisoned at the adult prison at Scheveningen.

Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman made countless telephone calls, destroyed everything that might in any way be considered incriminating to Arthur or the group, and might give the Germans a reason to take reprisals, but to no avail. Neither that night nor all the next day was there any word about Arthur. The following evening, about six o'clock, we had again just sat down to supper, two policemen were again announced.

Miss Sussman went to greet them, eager for news of Arthur.



She addressed them automatically in Dutch, without first noticing their uniforms. But this was not the Dutch police; it was the German SS!

One of the officers roared, "Never mind that Dutch twaddle; you can speak German. Where is Dr. Wolff?!"

Dr. Wolff was called. He gave the men the information they requested about Arthur's background and accompanied them to our room where they rummaged through Arthur's bed and all his personal effects and left.

Again Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman set about to get Arthur out of that horrible prison. Miss Sussman wrote letters to everyone she could think of who might be of help. She wrote a lengthy petition to the SS and to the German military authorities but without results. An attorney offered to plea for Arthur, a sum of money was collected for him. Still it was to no avail. The Germans waited for his eighteenth birthday; on that day, without a trial, without even giving him the opportunity to answer the countless letters that Miss Sussman and Dr. Wolff had written to him or to contact anyone at the *Jongenstehuis*, he was taken out and shot.

There was a tiny notice in the paper.

"Today, on the nineteenth of March 1942 at 5:00 A.M., Arthur W. was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out. On the flyleaf of his personal diary, Arthur had written: "Arthur W., born on March 19. 1924; died on March 19.1942-- exactly eighteen years old." The diary had been left behind among his personal effects in the *Jongenstehuis*.

All these years I've asked myself, "How did he know?"



Arthur was a loner, one of the persons who was unable to make friends. I suppose he just went to the pool to watch us. I really don't know. I never knew what he thought he would do with the gun, - defend himself from the Germans?

I don't know much about his family, either. He was a loner, as I said, but also, none of us talked much about our families. We knew very little about the others, except for our very close friends. Our families were too far away, in another life, and none of us knew if we would ever see them again. Most of us never did.

Arthur's theft of the gun made life worse for the rest of us. None of us knew anything about what he had done or why but we weren't sure the Nazis believed that. We were afraid that they would come back and arrest all of us, perhaps send us to a camp. I think I already was learning that the ones who stood alone were the first to fall. It made me determined to always stick with the group. But for the time being, the rest of us seemed to have been left in peace.

Events were moving very rapidly to their inevitable, unhappy conclusion. In June 1942, when the edict against Jews working for non-Jews became strictly enforced, I terminated my employment with Mrs. Thieme. I then went to work as a combination butler-baby sitter for a Jewish family named Gans. Mijnheer Gans was a traveling salesman for his own firm and thus was able to continue his employment. My duties were to help Clara, his wife, a charming and intelligent woman then in her early thirties, with the care of the house and their two





children, one-year-old Julie, a curly-headed honey blonde, and Jackie, a boisterous boy of three. I did not receive actual wages for this work but the good meals, cigarettes and friendly companionship of the Gans family more than made up for that.

Good meals were fast becoming a vital issue. The food at the *Jongenstehuis* had become so bad as to be almost inedible. Dr. Wolff had remained adamant in his insistence on retaining the kosher cuisine; thus the choice of food was limited. Meat was scarce, rationed and expensive and the home's slim budget did not allow for much of it. Thus most of our meals consisted of an "Einheitsgericht" a thin stew composed primarily of potatoes, cooked and mashed with the skins, carrots, turnips, sometimes a few apples and some scraps of meat. This was cooked in a great deal of watery gravy and accompanied by bread. No wonder those of us who could ate away from the *Jongenstehuis* as much as possible!

By August 1942 Dr. Wolff began making frequent and mysterious trips to Gestapo headquarters. Even those of us who were close to him did not question the purpose of these visits but we knew they had to do with our safety and protection. Deportations were a regular routine by now; the Nazis had set themselves a deadline -- June 1943-- for making Holland "Judenfrei." It was obvious that Dr. Wolff's dealings with the Gestapo, whatever they were, were calculated to prevent, or at least delay our deportation.

Whether or not he received any cooperation from the Gestapo, Dr. Wolff did receive an unexpected helping hand from Nature. Scarlet fever broke out in the *Jongenstehuis* toward the



end of 1942. Coming home from the Gans' one evening I began feeling feverish and uncomfortable. Zuster van Cleef took my temperature and promptly confined me to the "quarantine ward" where a dozen other patients were already bedded down. It was a mild epidemic of scarlet fever. I was in bed about six weeks without ever being very ill, but it served to keep the Nazis away from the *Jongenstehuis*. During this period I read voraciously; I particularly remember one of my reading projects - *Gone With the Wind* - which I read in Dutch, of course. Although I did not have the slightest understanding of the issues of the Civil War, I was most impressed with this portrayal of American life.

Several weeks after I had returned to the Gans' home - on December 9, 1942, to be exact - Mijnheer Gans came home and announced that the entire family was going underground immediately since all Jews were to be picked up for deportation on the following day. He could cite no source for his information; it was merely rumor, but the rumors which circulated in those days were nearly ninety-nine percent accurate. I helped them pack and returned early the following morning to say good-bye. I did not stay long; although I had become quite accustomed to good-byes by this time I still had not learned to endure them without grief.

I wandered slowly back to the *Jongenstehuis*. There was no sign of unusual activity on the streets. I lulled myself into thinking that perhaps the rumors had been false after all.

I was saying Good-bye to Arnhem without knowing it.

When I arrived at the *Jongenstehuis* the scene that greeted



me was like a slap in the face. Gestapo agents swarmed about; frightened boys and girls, their bags packed, stood waiting in line outside. Scarlet fever notwithstanding, we were about to be deported.

One of the Gestapo agents asked me, "Do you belong here?"

Had I denied my affiliation with the *Jongenstehuis* at that time, would I have been spared deportation? I do not know. I was too stunned by the sudden realization that the rumors had been correct, after all. My mind was still half on the Gans family; I wondered briefly if they had gotten to safety.

In fright and confusion, I stammered, "Yes."

The Gestapo man then told me to pack my bags and join the others.

Only then did I realize the significance of the trips to the Gestapo headquarters, the scarlet fever epidemic, and the unusual length of the quarantine. Dr. Wolff had been trying desperately to delay our deportation in the hopes that he could help many of his boys and girls to go underground. He was at least partially successful. With the help of Mevrouw Moll, he and Miss Sussman managed to hide a good percentage of them.

Some of these youngsters were caught later and sent on to Westerbork with the well known "S" (Strafe) armband, indicating that they were escapees. These never came back from the camps. But others managed to make their escape good, survived the war years, and eventually turned up in America, Canada, Israel and elsewhere.

I don't know why I didn't try to go underground too. I never really considered it. I didn't know anyone well enough to



ask them to hide me. America and my brother were far away. I thought there was no one in England, even if I could get there. It turned out that my Uncle Norbert and Aunt Gretel had managed to escape to London but I didn't find that out until after the war. Also, the group had become my home and family. I believed that somehow, as long as we were together, we would be all right.

For a time, this was what happened. Those of us who did not escape the transport had at least one consolation. We were together as a group and there was safety in numbers. Dr. Wolff had seen to this also. He had prolonged the scarlet fever epidemic by giving some of us pills, which produced red spots and a slight fever. Thus the Nazis, still dubious about our health condition and unwilling to risk a wide outbreak of the disease which could be quite dangerous in time of war, kept us together and quarantined us again immediately upon our arrival in camp

Dr. Wolff did not go with us. With tears streaming down his withered cheeks he watched us, herded like a bunch of young animals by the Gestapo agents, led toward the railroad station. He was soon to join us.

The journey into the unknown had begun.









## CHAPTER III

### Brother Against Brother

Westerbork 1942

I cannot say that I was really afraid during the uncomfortable journey to Westerbork. We had known for some time that deportation was inevitable and that it was merely a matter of time until our turn came unless we were fortunate enough to go underground; thus we had been, in a sense at least, prepared for the trip. We took comfort being together and tried valiantly not to think of the *Jongenstehuis* and its devoted staff that we were leaving behind nor of the bleak future which was facing us. We took pride in holding our heads high and refusing to show our feelings for we knew that nothing delighted the Nazis more than to see Jews give vent to their emotions and sob at the parting of relatives and friends. Nor did we complain about the difficult conditions on the transport train knowing that criticism -- expressed or implied -- could only arouse the Nazi ire. Thus we preserved a stoic silence.

Of course, compared to later journeys, this was really not bad at all. But I couldn't know that then.

Although we were not told our destination we knew where we were going by the same infallible grapevine system by which we had known of the proposed deportation -- and were somewhat reassured by the knowledge. Camp Westerbork was not in the true sense of the term a concentration camp; It was primarily a *Durchgangslager*, a transition camp where prisoners were kept only until some other plans could be made for them. Although Westerbork was considered



only temporary quarters and usually meant eventual deportation to the concentration camps of Poland and Germany, there was always the chance of being detained there on a long-term basis and avoiding the transports. As long as deportation to Poland could be staved off another day and then another day there was always the remote possibility of being spared altogether. Thus Westerbork meant, if not a pardon, at least a stay for the moment.

When I arrived at Camp Westerbork I had only vague notions of its construction and composition. I knew that it had been set up before the German occupation in order to provide quarters for the many families who fled Austria and Germany to take refuge in Holland. I had imagined it rather as a kind of enlarged quarantine camp similar to that in which I stayed before coming to the Rotterdam *Jongenstehuis*.

I was not surprised to find that Camp Westerbork was structurally much more elaborate than I had imagined it and that its administration was far more complex, but I was both surprised and shocked by the atmosphere of glowing hatred which became apparent to us almost immediately. This hatred was not, as might be expected, between Jews and Nazis but between the Dutch and the refugee inmates of the camp. It did not seem possible that this deep animosity could exist between two groups who were faced with the same common danger and found themselves under the rule of the same powerful enemy -- yet it did. In order to understand this schism fully it is necessary to delve briefly into the history of Camp Westerbork.

Westerbork was located in the Dutch province of Drenthe, in northeastern Holland. The surrounding territory was mostly arid



countryside, the closest thing to a desert that Holland has to offer. Westerbork was near no center of civilization; although an abandoned railroad track ran through the center of the camp there was no public transportation within four or five miles. Geographically it was probably the worst spot in Holland for a village of several thousand people.

This no-man's land was chosen as a site for a refugee internment camp by the Dutch government working in cooperation with the Jewish Refugee Committee. The Committee was responsible for the placement of refugee families who had entered the country illegally, had no friends, relatives or connections to Holland's large cities and had to be quartered somewhere. Westerbork was set up by the Dutch government and paid for by the Dutch Jewish Refugee Committee.

Established In Oct.1939 refugee Jews (about 750) were sent to Westerbork to create a settlement there and by 1941 it had a population of about 1,100.

Why choose such a forsaken area in such a fertile country as Holland?

There were two reasons for this. First, the law of self-preservation played its part in the choice of the site. The Dutch were afraid of the effect that the influx of large masses of refugees would have on their cities and towns. They reasoned that food would become scarce, schools would be more crowded, rents would go higher. They were protected against job shortages by the law that prevented non-citizens from holding jobs in Holland but even this did not give them complete protection, for the law was often observed in the breach rather than in the keeping. Secondly the





Dutch were a trifle distrustful of these foreigners, most of whom had come from an unfriendly country. Thus they preferred to keep these people away from their centers of defense and their dense industrial areas. It was fairly easy for the Dutch to justify their actions; they were, they believed, acting in the best interest of their refugee friends by giving them a community of their own in which to work and live.

It would perhaps seem that the refugees quartered at Westerbork should have been grateful to their Dutch hosts for the sanctuary provided them there in spite of its obvious drawbacks. In order to understand their resentment, however, it must be remembered that these people had just been forced out of their homeland because of the very same type of discrimination (and its logical outgrowth -- persecution) which they were now finding here at Westerbork. They had been labeled "different," and "unfit" to live with other segments of the population, made to remain apart, to live in ghettos, send their children to separate schools, shop in different stores, etc. They not only resented this discriminatory policy; they feared it.

There was also another factor that made Westerbork unpalatable to a large segment of its population -- its rural location. The Jewish culture is essentially an urban one; outside of the present state of Israel few Jews are found in rural communities or in agricultural pursuits. Their lifeblood flows in the shops, the offices, the factories and schools of cities. At Westerbork they were like fish out of water. They made the best of a bad situation but the seeds of dissension were sown. When the Nazis took over the camp it was a simple matter for them to nurse



these seeds into a crop of full-blooming hatred.

In Westerbork the Nazis inherited a gold mine. They did not have to build a camp and round up the Jewish population; the camp was already built and a large portion of the Jewish population was already in it. In addition to the excellent physical facilities that Westerbork provided for them, the attitudes and feelings prevalent in the camp were ideally suited to the Nazi plan. It was a simple matter for them to surround Westerbork with some barbed wire, set up watch towers and replace a cordon of Dutch police with SS guards in order to have a ready-made prison camp with a minimum of time and expense involved. The camp was supported with confiscated Jewish funds. They used the old inhabitants of Westerbork, called *Alteingesessene*, for their administration. The rift between the camp's two factions now erupted into open warfare. The big battle came over the administration.

Before the war Westerbork had a small administrative force headed by Van As and a Dutch agricultural expert, Zilke, whose job was to effect cultivation of the area around Westerbork and help the camp to become as self-supporting as possible. When the Nazis took over, Zilke and Van As were deposed although they still remained at Westerbork. The real voice of authority was vested in the new administration headed by a big, burly, baldheaded German Jew, Kurt Schlesinger, formerly head of the Werkstadt.

Kurt Schlesinger, a former factory owner, had come to Westerbork with his wife when the camp was first founded. His consequent knowledge of the camp together with his personality traits made him the logical Nazi choice for head of the administration. In 1943, Schlesinger was given charge of the main



card index, which was used to make up the deportation lists. As might be expected, he remained at Westerbork for the duration of the war.

Gruff and loud-voiced, Schlesinger was both in appearance and demeanor closely reminiscent of his Nazi prototype. His new position was a powerful one -- he was second only to the camp SS Kommandant Gemmeker -- and made him unbearably arrogant. Striding around the camp in his polished black boots and riding breeches he was every inch a German "Offizier." We would look at him and say, "If Schlesinger had not been a Jew he would have made a first-class Nazi."

SS Kommandant Albert Gemmeker was good looking with a Teutonic face. He always wore black boots. He carried a riding crop when he made his rounds as if he were some country squire, his dog trotting beside him. He also had a mistress living with him in the villa outside the camp so he left as much of the work as possible to Schlesinger. You could find Gemmeker only when the transports left, or on *Bunte Abend* performances, laughing at the jokes but never applauding.

Schlesinger was not only in charge of the camp office, he was also the head of the "cabinet." This cabinet was composed of the various *Dienstleiter* (service chiefs), all Jews, each of whom was in charge of a specific function of the camp such as the *Werkstadt*, the kitchen, the hospital, the *Ordnungs Dienst* (police force), the barracks and the grounds. There was also an *Ordonnanz* crew, composed primarily of young men such as myself, who were actually the camp messengers and errand boys. We worked directly under the administrative office staff.



Although the cabinet was directly responsible to Schlesinger and through him to the camp Kommandant Gemmeker, its members were very powerful in their own right. The lives and fates of the entire camp were quite literally in their hands. A *Dienstleiter* could always request deferment from transport for any member of his crew whom he considered essential. A *Dienstleiter* (and his friends) always had plenty to eat and had access to rations not for the general consumption. A *Dienstleiter* had better living quarters and more personal liberty than the other inhabitants. And -- most important of all -- a *Dienstleiter* could keep his own name off the weekly transport lists.

I have placed a good deal of emphasis on these transports and for good reason. The fear of being put on transport haunted every moment of our lives in Westerbork. The daily routine, though not pleasant, was not unbearable -- especially when compared to that of the camps I lived in later. But the constant fear of the unknown and the gnawing suspicion of what lay beyond the Here and Now combined to rob us of our peace of mind and to give the lie to our outwardly placid and reasonable ordered existence

There were no riots in Westerbork after I arrived there. Earlier, in the first days of the transports, there had been an uproar when families had been separated suddenly, children being sent off without their parents, wives without their husbands. This was due to a clerical mistake and we assumed it wouldn't happen again. It hadn't occurred to anyone that the Nazis would purposely break up families.

With some few exceptions we were not physically abused at Westerbork. Although our food was bad we were not starved, but our





lives were filled with fear, tension, hatred and suppressed violence. This seething conflict of brother against brother touched everyone who lived in Westerbork. The Nazis who were not without sensitivity when it suited their purpose - some of their most effective forms of torture and sadism were founded on a deep and exacting understanding of the feelings and emotions of their captives - found that this atmosphere suited them perfectly. A few months after they took over Westerbork they had reorganized it to utilize these feelings to the fullest.

The Nazi-appointed administrative staff was composed exclusively of German and Austrian Jews. This administration was responsible for the logging in of all incoming transports and for composing the list for the weekly transports to the various concentration camps. Naturally they saw to it that these outgoing transports were made up primarily of Dutch Jews who were coming to Westerbork from all parts of Holland. The Dutch in turn objected violently to this practice. "These refugees to whom we gave sanctuary are deporting us!" they cried. "This is your reward," replied the refugee administration, "for wrapping us up in one neat bundle and presenting us to the Nazis."

Thus righteous indignation and indignant righteousness clashed violently.

Because of this undercurrent of antagonistic forces at work in Westerbork the Nazis chose to keep the population there transient. Although it would have been a simple matter to adapt Westerbork's physical facilities to a permanent concentration camp, the Nazis preferred to keep it a *Durchgangslager* so that the majority of the population flowed through it in a matter of



several weeks and did not become firmly enough entrenched to constitute a threat to the *Alteingesessene* administration.

The Nazis knew they had a good thing in this administration; the camp functioned efficiently and with a minimum of effort on their part. Keeping potential troublesome forces on the move was the best way to preserve this desirable way of life.

Discipline within the camp was preserved by a form of solidarity in conjunction with the camp police force -- the OD's. The OD's, like the rest of the camp's administrative force, were taken from the *Alteingesessene*, outfitted with green fatigue uniforms ornamented with red and white armbands and equipped with *knuppel* (billy clubs) which they were not supposed to use except in emergencies. Their captain was a former Austrian Major Pisk, who, after being head of the *Feuerbrigade*, became Chief of the OD. Occasionally one or the other of them could not resist showing off his authority by using his *knuppel* but by and large the ODs served mostly a prestige function and were not heavily taxed with duties. Their prime responsibility was the enforcement of the camp curfew and the maintenance of a superficial kind of order. Sometimes they inspected the barracks but this was almost an invasion of the province of the *Barackenleiter* and therefore not favorably received.

One of the reasons the OD's job was not a difficult one was because of the solidarity that existed among the prisoners themselves. We lived in barracks of about two hundred; each prisoner was directly responsible to and for the rest of the members of his barrack. Thus if anyone did not show up for his assigned duties, created a disturbance in camp, failed to observe



curfew or, worst of all, attempted an escape, the entire barrack was subject to punishment. The *Barackenleiter* who had to answer to the administration for the action of each member of his barrack made quite certain that we all understood our responsibility toward each other. It was a highly effective form of control.

By the time I arrived in Westerbork in December 1942 its construction was completed. In essence it looked like a small rural town with one exception -- the lack of family homes. Westerbork had its own shops, electricians, watchmaker, shoemaker, ironmonger, laundry and maintenance plant. In addition there was a warehouse for storing food, bedding and furniture, a community kitchen, a hospital, several latrines and about thirty barracks.

There were two kinds of housing. First there were apartments that were built before the deportations, in which families lived together. Of these barracks roughly a dozen were so-called "family barracks" where the *Alteingesessene* lived with their families. Each barrack contained about four apartments of two and three rooms. Each family had its own apartment within the barrack. Although food for the entire camp was cooked in the community kitchen many of these family barracks had cooking facilities and those who were able to do so supplemented their diet with their own food. Then, when the deportations started, the Nazis built barracks. These were divided, one side for women and the other for men. This caused more resentment. The people in the apartments had privacy. They could cook their own meals. The



newcomers felt terrible. They had to depend on the main kitchen for their food. But they didn't usually stay long, only one or two weeks, so they didn't have time to make an effective protest. Again, this was part of the Nazis' plan.

I didn't mind being in the barracks because I was single and used to living with the group. We didn't expect to have a cottage. The group kept together in a corner. We had a table between the bunk beds separating the boys' side from the girls' and we ate together there. But sometimes the new families would take the table before we could and we resented that.

Every couple of weeks there would be new groups of people in the barracks. That's when I began to learn not to get attached to anyone, not to try to make new friends. They would soon be gone, no one was sure where. As time went on, one survived by cutting off feeling as much as possible. I was already separated from my family. Later my friends were taken away. I had to learn not to begin caring about the people I was with. It was that or be torn apart inside every time a train left. Watching them go, knowing that I might be on the next one, that was bad enough. I started to close down emotionally.

I still find friendships hard to make.

The rest of the barracks were large, barren and cheerless buildings divided into two huge rooms; one side housed the men and boys, the other was for women, girls and very young children. Bunks were mostly triple-deckers to save space and were the only





furniture in the barracks with the exception of the tables which were squeezed in the narrow space between bunks to make a "dining area." Each bunk was equipped with a straw sack mattress and one blanket. Theoretically, six people were allotted to each table for dinner; however there were times when it was impossible to find a space to eat in one's own barrack since families who were kept apart all the rest of the time took this opportunity to get together. Once a family had taken possession of a table it was impossible to dislodge them. It was much easier to find a friend in another barrack with whom to eat.

The barracks had no indoor toilet facilities although they did each have two washrooms, one for the men and the other for the women. These washrooms, which were always cold, contained a large trough with about a dozen cold water spouts. Except for the community laundry, the washrooms constituted the total washing facilities for the camp. Food at Westerbork was poor and scarce although it was far better and more plentiful than in the later camps. Rations consisted primarily of ersatz coffee, bread, boiled potatoes, turnips, horse meat and a kind of soup in which the vegetable peelings and heaven only knows what other scraps were boiled. My favorite food at Westerbork was pea soup with horse meat; it at least had a little flavor to it. Naturally we supplemented our diet whenever possible with "black market" foods and cigarettes.

Meals were served, if that term can be used, by the *Barackenleiter*. He and a staff of helpers who were usually elderly men unable to do any other kind of work would go to the community kitchen and bring back the food in large pails. A table erected in



the tiny hallway that separated the men's from the women's quarters served as a dispensing station. We would line up with our own plates, cups and cutlery and receive our dole from the *Barackenleiter*. Then the mad scramble for a place to sit, a few gulps and the food was gone. Second helpings were rare; if there was any extra food it was usually distributed among the *Barackenleiter* and the administrative staff.

Westerbork also had its own prison, the *Strafbaracke*. Actually there were two *Strafbaracken*, one for the men and one for women. The number of occupants varied from ten to two hundred depending on how good the Nazi haul had been. This was because most of the prisoners in the *Strafbaracke* were Jews who had been caught underground. Only a small percentage had actually been apprehended in Westerbork, usually for attempted escape. These prisoners were kept under constant and close supervision, they were not allowed to leave the barracks. An OD officer was stationed in each barrack on a twenty-four hour basis and a strict curfew was observed. As far as we knew treatment in the *Strafbaracke* was not brutal, prisoners did not have to wear prison uniforms or prison haircuts and their food was the same as ours. Nevertheless confinement in the *Strafbaracke* was a bitter punishment for it meant almost certain and immediate deportation. (As in the other barracks children were confined with their parents and subject to the same regulation.) In spite of the strict guarding a few prisoners managed to escape from the *Strafbaracke*, probably through the use of bribes and with outside help but the majority went on transport soon after their arrival. The Nazi propaganda machine made much of the *Strafbaracke*. We



heard via the grapevine that Westerbork's "prison" enjoyed great notoriety in Holland; the Nazis were using it to the fullest to discourage more Dutch Jews from going underground. At the same time they were passing the word around Westerbork that occupants of the *Strafbaracke* would receive much worse treatment on arrival at Auschwitz than other prisoners would. Later we learned that this was far from true. How we were treated depended totally on the whims of the Nazis when we arrived.

Throughout our stay at Westerbork the group from the *Jongenstehuis* was kept together. At first this was done because of the scarlet fever scare which necessitated our quarantine for the first two weeks in camp. When we were considered no longer dangerous we were placed in a regular barrack but still kept together as a group. The administration kept a watchful eye on our entire group and made a real attempt to save us from deportation as long as possible. The reason for this was twofold. In the first place many of us were personally known to the administration from our days in the quarantine camp and thus had a common bond with them and, secondly, we were on the "right side" politically speaking, since we were all refugee, not Dutch, Jews.

When we first arrived at Westerbork I was put to work unloading barbed wire and building fences with it, but after a few days of this I was transferred to the *Ordonnanz* crew. This turned out to be a fortunate move since the *Ordonnanz* worked directly under the administration and thus shared many of its privileges and immunities.

Our crew was made up entirely of young people like myself; our function was to carry messages from one *Dienstleiter* to



another and from the *Dienstleiter* to the camp Kommandant. There was no telephone to carry conversation or messages to and from the administrators. We had our own armbands, blue with yellow lettering, and were equipped with bicycles. Since we were often assigned to night duty we were exempt from curfew regulations. Except for the SS, only a few select members of the administration, including the Ordonnanz crew and OD, were allowed on the transport trains. We brought messages and food to the SS troops guarding these trains. They, of course, received better food than the prisoners except the coffee, which was ersatz even for them, and the leftovers were divided among the Ordonnanz boys.

Since we were allowed on the transport trains we were able to smuggle messages, food and packages to those who went on transport. Knowing that most of the transport trains took two days to arrive at their destinations and that no food would be given to the people on board in that time we attempted to provide them with as much nourishment as we could. Nevertheless we knew that many would not survive the trip.

Entering these transport trains was one of the most miserable experiences of my camp days. Families huddled together; children clung to their parents for comfort that the parents were unable to give them. Sanitation facilities on the trains were nonexistent since almost all of them were cattle cars. During the fifteen months I was at Westerbork I saw only two passenger trains leave there. These were filled exclusively with old people -- many of them World War I veterans -- who were being sent to *Theresienstadt*, one of the so-called "better" camps for older people. On the other trains conditions were extremely arduous. It







was impossible, because of the crowded conditions, to sit, stand or lie in anything resembling a comfortable position. We could well imagine the conditions in which they arrived at their destination.

Although we were not told directly what the destinations of the transport trains were, we knew pretty well where most of them were going; however, we had no idea what these places were like. They were just names to us. We thought the other camps were just like ours, places to keep us until the war was over. Perhaps the ones making up the lists knew more about it, but I'm not sure. How could anyone imagine anything like the death camps? Nobody came back to tell what it was like so we didn't know. We were completely ignorant.

I was one of those who had the job of cleaning out the trains when they came back. All I knew was from the names scribbled on the walls of the train cars with messages such as, "I went to Auschwitz" or "I was taken to Theresienstadt". Indications were that most of the transport trains went to these two destinations, Whereas older people nearly always went to Theresienstadt, families and young people usually went to Auschwitz. I had a firsthand opportunity to learn about Auschwitz later.

There was an odd thing associated with the transports. Each Tuesday, the day the trains left going east, the kitchen would make this wonderful split pea soup. You could smell it all over the camp. The trains left at ten or eleven and the soup was served at twelve so the people left with the aroma of this soup that they never got to eat as their last memory of Westerbork.



Naturally there were many attempts to obtain deferment from these transports. Deferment could be obtained in several ways: referred to as "Die Sperre" - the roadblock - (1) It could be bought for a set sum of money, (2) it could be granted by friends in the administration or (3) it would be automatically given to anyone occupying an "essential" position. "Essential" could be, and usually was, rather loosely defined; members of all facets of the administrations, including *Ordonnanz*, were included in this category. For a time deferments were also granted to members of the camp orchestra and artists who performed in the *Bunte Abende* (variety show) productions.

The orchestra was composed mainly of former Amsterdam *Concertgebouw* musicians. Many of Holland's leading cabaret artists such as Max Ehrlich, Jetty Cantor, and Johnny and Jones, performed in the *Bunte Abende*. For a time the orchestra played several times during the week except Monday when preparations were made for the Tuesday transports. Transports left every week and were required by the Nazis to carry no less than six hundred people. When the required six hundred were not available the administration had to search through its list of "essential" personnel and draft from these positions. This always became a madhouse. Since the orchestra members and artists were mostly Dutch they were among the first group to go when deferments were no longer possible. After several concerts and cabaret performances these had to be given up because of the deportation



of the participants.

While we were all afraid of the deportations, it was more a fear of the unknown. Westerbork was bad but tolerable. We had our own clothes, our possessions. No one shaved our heads. People came in with money. They also brought food, like sausages, and left it behind when they were sent on. That's what we thought the concentration camps were going to be like. We were living under the illusion that the food and conditions would be the same. I thought that we were being held just until the war was over and then, even if the Germans won, we would be released and sent home. It never occurred to me that they would want to kill us.

My duties in the *Ordonnanz* gave me a great deal of mobility and thus I became acquainted with more of the inhabitants of the camp than I would have known had I been assigned to one of the more confining laboring jobs. This had both advantages and disadvantages. One of the acquaintances I made in this way was a young man about five years my senior who had been a head waiter on cruise ships in civilian life. His sole function at Westerbork was to wait on the table of the Kommandant and the SS troops. He had a kind of billboard type of good looks; he was slim, wore his dark hair combed back smoothly and walked with a somewhat affected jauntiness. He lived in one of the family barracks and was even privileged enough to have his own room. One evening before I was to go on night duty he invited me to his room to share some of the tidbits he received from the Kommandant's



table. I was so absorbed in the food -- the like of which I had not seen since coming to Westerbork -- that I failed to notice his rather peculiar manner. Before I knew what was happening he was making advances toward me. It was my first experience with a homosexual and it shocked me. Later I was to become more indifferent and tolerant toward homosexuals.

Physical illness -- such as polio and yellow jaundice, which were common at Westerbork-- could be treated at least to some extent at the camp hospital but there were no facilities for the mentally ill or the socially maladjusted. The former were usually quickly deported and annihilated; the latter were largely ignored and left to shift for themselves.

As might be expected, sexual promiscuity was also widespread at Westerbork. One of the favorite meeting places for the young people of the camp was a warehouse behind the Werkstadt where beds and mattresses were stored. The OD's were of course aware of these trysts, most of which were held after curfew hours, but since they were themselves active participants they deigned to enforce any discipline.

Girls who became pregnant at Westerbork, however, were the first ones to go, as soon as the babies were born. Why they were kept until then, I don't know. Babies and small children were sent through quickly. I suppose that should have given us a clue that the Nazis wanted to destroy us completely but, again, who could imagine anything so terrible? The doctors at the hospital there tried to keep the women and babies as long as possible but they couldn't do much.





At the beginning of summer 1943 several of the *Ordonnanz* boys and I were taken off *Ordonnanz* duty and put to work on a nearby farm. Many of the inmates of Westerbork worked on farms in the surrounding territory. These farms belonged to Dutch civilians and had no connection whatever with the camp. We plowed, weeded, harvested, dug potatoes, etc. Although we were not paid for our services (I can only assume that the camp administration received some kind of per capita compensation from the farmers for our labors) being on the farm did have its advantages. In the first place we commuted several miles to and from the camp each day and thus were actually in the "outside world." It was good to get away from the prison atmosphere of Westerbork even for only a few hours. Secondly our contacts with the outside were lucrative because we could thus avail ourselves of the very profitable enterprise of black marketeering.

Most of our commuting to and from the camp was done on foot without benefit of an SS escort since we were considered "trustees." However a lorry on small spur tracks did run between Westerbork and the farm country; this lorry was used primarily for carrying dirt to and from the camp. Underneath the dirt we smuggled such black market items as fresh fruit, vegetables, butter, cigarettes, etc. The lorry was operated by a friend of mine from the *Jongenstehuis*, Richard Teig, a machinist; therefore I was often able to ride along and guard the contraband merchandise.

Money was no problem at Westerbork; many of the inmates had had plenty of money on the outside and since there was nothing to spend it on in Westerbork they were more than happy to pay for the



black market items. Often we were given money in advance for the purchase of specific items; at other times we borrowed from friends and split the profits after the sale was made.

Naturally there were many attempted -- and even some completed -- escapes at Westerbork. Whenever possible a potential escapee tried to get assigned to farm duty because from the farm it was a relatively simple matter to "disappear." For a successful escape, however, it was essential to have competent outside help; otherwise an escapee would be rounded up within a matter of hours, placed in the *Strafbaracke* and deported. Not knowing anyone on the outside who would hide me until the Gestapo tired of hunting for me, or until I could be smuggled out of the country I never tried escape myself.

There were even some successful escapes from Westerbork itself although these were much more difficult. In order to escape from camp it was necessary first to cut through the barbed wire, swim across a water ditch which surrounded most of the camp, cut some more wires on the other side of the ditch and traverse the surrounding flat countryside without being discovered by a guard. It was a difficult and risky business but those who did it were both skillful and desperate.

Several months after we arrived at Westerbork Dr. Wolff joined us. Although he was not placed in our barrack we nevertheless saw a great deal of him. But in this strange environment we were not as close as we had been in Arnhem. The atmosphere at Westerbork precluded close associations; we knew that any day might be our last in the camp and we therefore avoided forming any close attachments. At Arnhem we had lived in a



rather false security; we had known that our precarious existence could not last yet the knowledge that we would be together when the blow fell gave us strength and drew us even closer. At Westerbork we soon learned that we had to shift for ourselves. The tie was broken when we left the *Jongenstehuis*. We were still the same group, the same faces, the same names, the same people -- but the homogeneity of the group was gone. We were merely individuals who had shared a common living experience. Dr. Wolff sensed this also; he did not attempt to draw us to him or to preserve any of the spirit of the *Jongenstehuis*. His only hope was that -- as individuals-- some of us would survive.

In spite of this, it was the friendships I did make that helped me to survive. It is a paradox I can't explain. One had to be remote to keep from emotional death each time friends were deported or died, but we needed each other all the same.

Until the end of 1943 the administration had managed to keep our "block" of sixty out of the weekly transports. They had not considered deporting us individually and as a group we would have constituted an "overflow." However by the end of 1943 nearly all the Jews in Holland had been rounded up and transported with exception of those who had managed to go underground successfully. The underground movement had gained such a strong foothold that these few remaining Jews could not be found. It was now becoming difficult to fill the Nazis' demands for six hundred Jews a week.

Had we been kept together as a group we surely would have been deported as a group to fill a weekly quota; therefore the administration reversed itself and began considering us as individuals. They began deporting a few each week, keeping others



back in the "essential" category hoping that by delay and procrastination they could save at least a few. Some of the group home kids knew people in the Westerbork administration and they managed to stay off the deportation lists. About now the solidarity of the group began to fall slowly apart. I stayed closest to the people I went to Auschwitz with, Arthur Gerichter and Werner. A few of the group did remain at Westerbork for the duration of the war, but by the time I left in March 1944 only a handful of our original group remained. On the transport with me went about ten others from the *Jongenstehuis*. Of these I was the only one who came back.





The Crossroads

Tuesday, March 22, 1944, was my last day at Westerbork. Although Westerbork had been far from a pleasant experience, on that day I regarded it with an almost nostalgic longing. For even in all its unpleasantness it was much better than what we were almost certain to find at the end of our journey on the transport.

As late as Monday, March 21, several of us slated to go on transport the next day were still trying to get deferred -- but without success. I asked everyone I could think of but it was no use. There was no one to take our place; our time had come.

This transport took almost all the remaining members of the *Jongenstehuis*; the few who remained behind were fortunate enough to spend the entire war years at Westerbork. Among these were my friend Richard Teig who operated the lorry, Lisl Zuckerbäcker with whom I attended the forbidden performance of *Land des Lächelns* in Arnhem, her sister Trude, Mary Loewenkopf, Gerhard Perl, Bubi Hirsch, O. Casparius, and a few others.

Through the help of our friends we managed to get a 'private' cattle car; i.e., there were only fifteen of us in one car instead of the usual thirty or forty. There were of course no seats in these cars. There were also no windows and what air vents the cars had were boarded up to foil any attempts at escape. With no sanitation facilities except a bucket in one



corner of the car the smell became quite overpowering by the end of the two-day journey.

As luggage we each had a rucksack packed with our personal belongings and the clothes on our backs. These were for the most part good heavy winter clothes and sturdy boots. The trip was the last time we were adequately dressed. Our friends at Westerbork had seen to it that we were amply supplied with food for the trip and blankets to keep us warm at night. We also had a harmonica and some cards and passed the time by singing, playing cards, smoking and talking about our probable destination. We had not been told where we were going but we were pretty certain that it would be Auschwitz.

The name of the camp, however, was all that we knew. We could only speculate on what it would be like. To indicate how naive we were about the details of life in a real concentration camp I should mention that we kept back some of the food that had been sent along with us, good sausage, cheese, etc., because we expected to be hungry later. We did not even think that we wouldn't be allowed to keep those things.

On the train with us there was a group of mentally handicapped people. The Nazis had emptied an institution in Oppendorn in Holland and sent maybe fifty of them of all ages to Auschwitz. God, that was a horrible sight. These people of course had no idea what was happening to them. They were confused and frightened. There seemed to be no attendant with them at all. At night when everything was fairly still their pitiful



crying could be heard above the clatter of the train.

I don't know what I had really expected of Auschwitz but I remember being surprised and overwhelmed when we arrived. The train did not stop at Auschwitz proper but at its satellite camp, Birkenau. When they opened the door all I heard was:

"Raus, Raus, Mach schnell!"

This seems to have been the mantra of the SS for every occasion: inspection, wake-up and roll call. "Hurry, hurry!"

I remember seeing a stack of wooden boards for future buildings and a number of men in striped uniforms. The uniforms confused me; I could not figure out the function of these people. At first I thought they were prisoners, I did not yet consider myself a prisoner, but later I learned that everyone in Auschwitz, except of course the SS men, wore striped uniforms. These uniformed men helped the SS guards who had gone along with us on the transport to unload the train. We scrambled out of the smelly cattle car. They lined us up and counted us, then in a single file we were marched towards a building.

The SS men knew that as soon as we were inside that building their jurisdiction over us ceased and we were in the hands of the camp staff; therefore they availed themselves of this last opportunity to plunder and steal from us. They actually attempted to remove our boots while we were marching and also took our belts from us along with any other articles of value that we were wearing. They didn't dare take everything because the SS men inside expected to get most of what was brought in.

Once inside the building, the men and women were separated. The women were led through another door and presumably



inducted into the routine of Birkenau life elsewhere, if they survived the first day.

Inside there was a large room with two doors. The system was primitive when we got there. Later I understand they changed it. At that time everything was in one place. The men were brought into the barrack and there were three Nazis there. We were paraded before them. They looked at us and then the one in the middle pointed either to the left or the right. When they opened the door on the right you could see black showerheads. That was the gas although I didn't know it then. Later on they let people undress in the barrack and then took them to a gas chamber that they built on the grounds.

The mentally handicapped patients from our train lined the back wall of the room, sitting, rocking and lying around on the floor, whimpering and trying to communicate with each other. Every time the right door opened a few of them were shoved into that room. Later I learned they had all been gassed. That memory has haunted me all my life.

Once the people from the mental institution had been disposed of, the rest of the men and boys were lined up single file in front of the three SS men standing behind a table. First we were relieved of our rucksacks and all our personal possessions. All I was able to keep with me was a metal case for my glasses; into this case I slipped photographs of my parents and my brother. Secondly, we were marched slowly past the SS man standing in the middle who at that moment decided whether I





should live or die.

Behind him were the two doors. As I stood before him he glanced at me briefly through half-closed eyes and in a split second lazily flicked his forefinger toward the left-hand door. I didn't know what the black showerheads meant until I got to Monowitz. Gunther, a boy from the group home who had gone before us, explained it to me then. It horrified me that one flick of a finger had made the difference to my survival. Even worse was thinking about the people who had been obliterated by the same casual gesture.

The mock-shower bath and the incinerator in which the bodies were burned were Auschwitz's most infamous features. Fortunately I did not remain at Auschwitz to become acquainted with either one. All of the boys from the *Jongenstehuis* and the younger men from the transport had been saved by the Nazis to work in the labor camps.

After passing through the door we found ourselves outside again. We were lined up by the men in the striped uniforms, who we learned were called "kapos" (chiefs), and again taken in tow by the SS. We were marched for what seemed like forever but was probably no more than two miles.

Finally we came to an archway bearing the ironic inscription "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" in large iron letters. This was the entrance to Auschwitz proper where "Arbeit", work, was plentiful but "Freiheit", freedom, nonexistent.

By this time it was twilight and difficult to see but it



seemed to me that we were in a corner of the camp's grounds. It was not too dark; however, to see the barbed wire that surrounded the camp. The kapos carefully pointed out to us that the barbed wire was topped by three rows of thousands of volts of electrified wire in case we had any ideas about jumping. By then, I couldn't have jumped anywhere. All I wanted to do was sleep.

There was a terrible smell permeating the camp. I couldn't figure out where it came from.

"It's the Crematorium," the kapo told us.

I didn't ask any more questions.

Auschwitz (Oscwiecim) is just 30 miles west of Krakow, Poland and in March there is still snow on the ground. Nevertheless we stood for two hours outside in the snow (we had had no food or water since our arrival) and were told to strip off everything except our belts, if the guards hadn't already stolen them. These we had to retain to keep our prison suits up. But they didn't give us our prison clothes, yet. We stood another hour in the snow without any clothing on at all, exhausted, hungry, thirsty and freezing. By now I knew this was not going to be like Westerbork.

Finally one of the kapos told us to go inside another building. We found ourselves in a large hall furnished only with several desks and a few chairs. Again we went through several lines.

In the first line we were shaved from head to toe by one of the kapos equipped with a razor and a pair of barber clippers. In the second line a kapo took our names, country of origin and



religion. In the third line a number was tattooed on our left forearms. At that moment I became 175345; a number, no name, no other identity. From then on we were to be known by this number only. I later compared my tattoo with that of the other inmates and discovered that I had been lucky after all; evidently the kapo who did my tattoo had had some experience in this line of work. At least the number on my arm was done fairly neatly whereas some of the other prisoners had numbers weaving crazily over their whole arms. We soon learned to be grateful for very minor things.

After this operation was completed we were given ersatz soap, which was mostly sand, and sent into a -- real -- shower room. After we had scrubbed (the shower room actually contained hot water, a real luxury in a concentration camp) we were inspected by two kapos and an SS man. The SS man noticed that I was holding my glasses case and asked me what I had in it. I told him that it contained pictures of my family. After looking at it closely and determining that I was telling the truth he allowed me to keep the case and the pictures. I still don't know why he did that. Such a small kindness in a sea of cruelty makes no sense.

Each of us was then given a striped shirt, a pair of pants, a thin jacket, a cap, a pair of shoes (our good boots were gone!) and two squares of cloth. I did not know what to do with these until someone showed me how to tie them around my feet for socks. We had been given no towels so we dressed hurriedly trying to dry off in our clothes; however, before we were half dry we were again driven outside.



In our thin clothing we ran the equivalent of several city blocks to the prison barrack. This was a large concrete building called a bunker. Inside there were a number of doorless cubicles. One side of the bunker six feet from the floor had a two foot square window without a cover; on the other side on the bottom ran a trough along the wall that was spattered with blood. We were each given a thin blanket and told to bed down on the cement floor. Later we learned that we were quartered in the infamous Block 11 that had previously been used for Nazi torture and experiments with silent guns. These had been shot off in the basement of Block 11 using prisoners as live guinea pigs. They hadn't even bothered to wash off the blood.

In the morning I felt terrible, too ill to get up. Some of the other boys brought me food, such as it was, and blankets. If they hadn't taken care of me, I would have been sent back to die, I'm sure. The kapos left me alone although they were quite hostile. I was ill for several days from cold, hunger, fatigue and anxiety. Although I received no medical attention during that time I recovered sufficiently to be shipped out with our group.

I was in Auschwitz about ten days altogether; while I was there our daily routine was always the same. In the morning the kapos selected a few men to go to the kitchen and bring breakfast which consisted in its entirety of a thin brown liquid they called coffee made from red beets. After breakfast we were given a small wash basin and told to scrub out our cells. In the afternoon the kapos gave us an airing in the small courtyard outside.

All this time I didn't try to speculate on what would





happen next. All of us were scared, too scared even to think.

In the evening we received our meal of the day. This was soup made of potatoes, some rotten, turnips or cabbage accompanied by a piece of dark bread and a pat of margarine. If we were fortunate we received a "Nachschlag" -- a second helping of the soup. The only eating utensil we were given was an enameled metal bowl. We did not receive any cutlery, presumably because of the danger in providing us with weapons such as knives and forks. Actually these were not necessary for the kind of food that made up our diet at Auschwitz was largely liquid since there was no drinking water. What little water there was contained typhus germs and prisoners were warned against drinking it.

During one of our afternoon "airings" I heard music coming from somewhere. I asked one of the kapos what this was and was told that the camp maintained a regular orchestra made up of prisoner musicians. The orchestra gave concerts for the camp's administrative staff's recreation program which naturally did not apply to prisoners. As far as I know the only other organized recreation for the administrative staff was provided by the camp brothel called the "puff."

Even at Auschwitz, with its barbed wire, electrified fence, watchtowers and numerous guards there were several escapes. Escapes were generally discovered only during evening roll call; therefore escapees could usually gain an advantage of several hours by timing their escape correctly. The most frequently successful escapees were Poles who knew both the language and the terrain of the country. However I did not know anyone who escaped from Auschwitz while I was there.



For ten days we continued our aimless existence in our prison quarters. Because we were so closely confined I never had the opportunity of finding out how large Auschwitz really was although I knew that it had a large number of wooden barracks in addition to the concrete blocks. These blocks were not normally used for permanent quarters; I suspect that we were quartered there only for lack of space and that lack of space was the primary reason for our next move.

One day, just before we were moved out, I was standing by the window when I heard a voice, a woman's voice, calling from the next building. I had not seen any women since we left Birkenau and had been under the impression that they had all been left there; therefore I was quite surprised to hear one. I was even more surprised to find it was Frieda Komornik from the *Jongenstehuis* who told me that the others in her bunker were mostly young girls.

We were not allowed to talk to the women in the bunker and thus our conversation was of necessity a brief one. I noticed that she was neatly dressed, not in prison uniform, and that her head was not shaved. She told me this was the notorious Block 10 where the Nazis were conducting medical experiments.

She said, "I will talk to you tomorrow."

But our tomorrow never came.

Instead, the next morning a truck drove up and took us boys and men away to the labor camp.

I later learned that Frieda survived the war and lived two more years after it. I found out where she was but didn't contact her. At that point I couldn't stand learning what they



had done to her.

We had no warning that we were leaving Auschwitz. That morning we were told to line up in the courtyard. An SS man looked us over and chose about forty of our group of a hundred to "step aside." I looked about and noticed that of our group from the *Jongenstehuis* only one other boy, Arthur Gerechter, and I remained. The rest had been lost in the maze of transports, changes and transfers.

We did not know what we had been chosen for. We were marched out, loaded on a truck and unloaded a few hours later at another camp. Arthur and I stayed close to each other. He was the one familiar thing in this nightmare. For the time being we were saved. Of those who remained behind none is alive today.

### Monowitz

It was twilight when we arrived at our destination. I can remember only a long series of wooden barracks. Nowhere was there a sign that told us where we were and therefore we had no way of knowing what our fate was to be. Was this another extermination center? Was it a work camp? Why were we chosen to come here? How would they treat us? These and similar questions went through all our minds. Most remained unanswered.

We were lined up in front of an empty barrack and once more told to stand and wait. Finally a kapo came and showed us to our bunks. The barrack contained four rows of double-tiered bunks, forty to a row. About two feet of space remained between



each row of bunks. Our transport was joined by another transport from Auschwitz and together we filled one barrack. Arthur took the bunk underneath mine. The other two bunks were occupied by two prisoners from the other transport with whom we soon formed a close friendship. Arthur's neighbor was Robert Hajek, mine was Joseph Kupferman.

Hajek was a Viennese Jew in his late thirties, thin, nice looking and very pleasant. He had escaped from Vienna in 1938 and fled to France where he had married a French girl. He was picked up by the Gestapo in France and taken to a camp somewhere in Belgium. His wife and his small child were non-Jewish and thus were not arrested with him. In the Belgium camp he had formed an alliance with Joe Kupferman. Kupferman was also a Viennese Jew, then in his early forties, well built and good looking. Like Hajek he also had fled Vienna in 1938 to Belgium where he had married a Belgian girl. His wife and young son were left in Belgium. Kupferman was arrested in Marseilles as part of the resistance movement but given the opportunity to join a Jewish transport to Dancy to escape prosecution. From there he was sent to Auschwitz. Intelligent, good humored and easy going, Kupferman presented a good contrast to the rather nervous Hajek. Arthur and I derived a great deal of strength and encouragement from their association. These older men took the place of the fathers, uncles and older brothers we were separated from.

Although Kupferman and Hajek had also come from Auschwitz they had been there only a few hours and thus knew even less about the camp than we did. Like us they were completely in the dark about our present whereabouts and about the Nazis' plan for





our future. After we had been assigned bunks we were again told to go outside and line up to get our dinner. We had our dinner bowls from Auschwitz with us and again received our rations of soup and bread. During the distribution of the dinner we had our first glimpses of the prisoners in this camp. I was appalled to note that they were even shabbier and hungrier-looking than the ones we had left behind at Auschwitz. I noticed too that all the prisoners here carried their bowls with them all the times in hopes of finding someone who did not want his "Nachschlag" and would give it to them for whatever they had to trade for it. This was especially true whenever a new transport arrived.

As we were eating, a short fellow about my age came around begging for our "Nachschlag." When he came to me he stared; suddenly, looked into my face and said, "Jackie, don't you know me?"

I looked at him again. My God, I did know him. "Yes, now I recognize you." I said.

It was Gunther Natowitz from the *Jongenstehuis*.

Gunther had joined the *Jongenstehuis* group in Rotterdam and became one of its most popular members. Although serious by nature -- he had been involved in many hot arguments with Dr. Wolff -- he had a streak of good humor which netted him the good will of nearly everyone. Gunther, who had also been at Westerbork, had gone on the transport nearly six months earlier. Starvation and the camp conditions had changed him terribly. Would this soon happen to me?

He asked me briefly about the others.

"Who is left?"



"Who went on transport with you?"

"Where did you come from?"

From Gunther I learned that we were at Monowitz and that Monowitz was a work camp. Quickly he filled me in on the essential points of camp life.

"I work in a synthetic rubber factory, I.G.Farben, also called Buna. There is a prisoner of war camp near here. The American and English prisoners get Red Cross packages and sometimes we get chocolate from them."

You don't volunteer for anything," he told me, "and take off your cap when an SS man comes by or you get slapped in the face."

I quickly passed this advice on to the others, gave Gunther my "Nachschlag" and received in return my first introduction to "camp cigarettes." At the time I did not know all the intricacies of obtaining, and often creating, camp cigarettes but I was soon to learn all of this.

After dinner we returned to the barrack and a kapo came in and asked for prisoners who could type. Remembering Gunther's advice we kept silent, although several other prisoners raised their hands.

They were sent out to do heavy labor.

We were tired enough that night to sleep well on the straw sacks that made our mattresses. At the time we did not know that we were fortunate in each having our own bunks and not being plagued by lice.

The next morning we were awakened at four o'clock and told to wash, of course without soap or towel, and given our morning



coffee. We were assigned various duties, such as cleaning the barracks, picking up debris on the grounds, etc. We watched as the regular prisoners, for we were still not considered more than transients, marched out to work to the music of the camp orchestra. There were columns of literally thousands of striped uniforms. I wondered where they had all come from and how long they had to live. The older prisoners were most uncommunicative; if it had not been for Gunther we would probably never have found out where we were.

Out of our barrack there was a group of about thirty that had not been assigned to any regular duty so we were told to move rocks from one end of the camp to another. It was aimless work and it became evident that there was no real reason for our being there. Thus we were quite certain that we would be moved again. This was not a pleasant prospect. There was a certain comfort in knowing that you would wake up in the same place tomorrow. But for us Monowitz was only another temporary stopover.

We were there about a week altogether -- long enough to witness one of the weekend "entertainments" which the SS provided for the prisoners. It was Sunday afternoon, when the factory was not working. The orchestra began to play and the entire camp was marched out to the *Appellplatz*. A gallows had been erected there and a Czech prisoner who had attempted an escape was to be executed. The execution was preceded by reading of the "charges" against the prisoner. This was done by the camp Kommandant, impeccably attired for the occasion in a shiny uniform complete with spotless white gloves and white shawl and riding crop. He was escorted by a few dogs. The reading was followed by more



music and the actual execution. Then the entire camp population was forced to march around the gallows and look at the hanging man as a warning against any other such foolish attempts. This was strictly enforced; there was no turning away of heads. I had never seen anyone hanged before.

After a week our aimless existence came to an abrupt end. We were told to line up outside the barrack and two camp officials came along and counted us. The first wore a black armband with the word "*Schreiber*" on it; the second wore no armband but was distinguished from the prisoners by the fact that he wore a neat black jacket rather than the prison uniform. After they had counted us they went away; a little while later an SS man came by and counted us again. Then we were loaded into trucks and driven away -- still with no knowledge of our destination. The two camp officials and the SS man traveled with us. They were to be with us for some time.





## CHAPTER V

### Bondage

Laurahütte, April 1944

Our camp motto -- "Es kommt nichts besseres nach" -- ("What ever follows will not be better") was drawn from experience. Each succeeding move had proved to be for the worse and we had come to fear any and all moves. Although we did not know our destination when we left Monowitz we were pretty certain that the move was not intended for our betterment. Technically we were correct.

Until now we had been merely prisoners of the Nazis -- we were housed, fed and clothed, however inadequately, at their expense and not asked to contribute to our support. From the moment we were dumped from our trucks at Laurahütte all that changed. We changed from prisoners with no purpose in life other than to stay alive to men with a purpose. That purpose was to aid the Nazis in working actively toward our own destruction.

The term "forced labor" is pregnant with meaning; it means labor without pay, without recognition, without reward, but more than that it means labor for a cause not only foreign but downright repugnant to one's very being. Laurahütte was a forced labor camp. The cause for which we were to labor was the Nazi cause. The Nazi cause was the destruction of everything in which we believed and -- ultimately -- the destruction of our own lives.

I purposely stress Life above Belief. In the days that were



to follow I had the opportunity to learn firsthand that nothing, no Belief, no Cause, is more important than Life itself. I saw men commit the vilest acts -- crimes against Nature and against Humanity -- merely to preserve the tiniest spark of Life in themselves. When Life seemed over and Death should have been welcome, Existence became our goal and for this we worked and struggled and fought. Much of what we saw we ignored, much of what we knew we shut out of our minds; all our energies were massed together in our gigantic effort to survive. Survival went not only to the fittest but to those most devoted to it.

Laurahütte was a pivotal point in my camp experiences. The Polish name for it is unknown to me; it was near the town of Krakow. It was, roughly speaking, the "middle" camp for me. I spent more time there than anywhere else and therefore became better acquainted with Laurahütte and its organization than any of the other camps. It also represents a nice balance between the best and the worst camps in terms of treatment and living conditions. I will therefore spend more time discussing the structure of, and life at, Laurahütte than the other camps. Much of what is said of Laurahütte undoubtedly applied to the other camps also since Laurahütte was fairly typical in its administration and personnel; however, the bulk of my personal experience of camp life was gained at Laurahütte and I can only surmise similar conditions at other labor camps.

We arrived at Laurahütte in the early part of April 1944. Much to our surprise we found, not a concentration camp, but a factory surrounded by several small buildings that had evidently been used for administrative offices for the factory personnel.



What we were seeing was actually the converted remains of one of Germany's largest typewriter factories. This factory had been moved from Germany's industrial center to the relatively safe location of Laurahütte and converted from the manufacture of typewriters to the manufacture of anti-aircraft parts. It had been operated until our arrival largely by the same people who had worked in it before its conversion. It soon became apparent to the Nazis, however, that there were not enough civilian personnel to keep the factory operating at the full speed necessary for adequate production. It was also much more expensive to pay free workers. Thus we now found ourselves with a new *raison d'être*, to add fuel to the Nazi fires.

Now we understood the method behind the selection at Auschwitz. The finger had pointed to the left for those who appeared capable of labor and the right for the aged, the weak and the infirm. We were becoming more and more familiar with Nazi strategy.

We arrived at Laurahütte about mid-afternoon and were immediately put to work. This was a departure from the customary Nazi policy of registration, disinfection, roll call and all the other administrative detail so dear to their sense of efficiency. Laurahütte, however, had as yet no facilities for these things; we were to help erect them. When we arrived the grounds were littered with bits of wood, scrap metal and debris. We were told to pick them up and stack them in an assigned area, to be used later.

As we worked we looked around us to try and take in the lay of the land. We noticed that there were really only three



complete buildings; these were made of brick and stone, which differed from the hastily erected wooden barracks that characterized most concentration camps. A fourth building was under construction and would obviously be completed with prison labor. Two more buildings were added later but had not been begun when we arrived.

In addition to the customary wires, both barbed and electric, which marked the camp boundaries, there was also a high wall which ran along the front of the camp and contained the sentry towers. We noted with some surprise that one two-story building was located outside the regular camp grounds and not fenced in. This we learned later was the private quarters of the Kommandant and the SS. The building also contained the *Schreibstube* that served as the camp office. Naturally they did not need to be fenced in.

After we had worked a couple of hours it grew dark and we were told to go into the large building which had been outfitted as a barrack and pick out our bunks. The bunks were equipped with straw sack mattresses and one blanket per prisoner. Our foursome, Kupferman, Hajek, Gerechter and I, headed for the last four bunks in one corner in order to avail ourselves of the little privacy that the huge barrack had to offer. The entire barrack was nothing more than a huge hall divided in the center by an aisle. Two rows of triple decker bunks made up each side. This building backed directly on an open street; the other two walls were part of the factory building; no wall or fence was deemed necessary behind it since the only door was in the front and spilled out directly on the *Appellplatz*. The *Lagerälteste*, the kapos and the





*Läufer*, who was the Kommandant's personal valet, slept in the bunks on either side of the door and no one came and went without their knowledge.

After we had chosen our bunks we were called outside for dinner. Dinner at Laurahütte was always served outside in the *Appellplatz* -- rain or shine, summer or winter. Both the procedure and the food were always the same. On the first day because we had not had any food all day, we were given our "big" meal in the evening; usually this came at noon and we had only a light supper in the evening. Breakfast consisted of ersatz coffee which looked and tasted like dirty dishwasher; for dinner we received a kind of soup made from boiled potatoes (with skins), boiled turnips and unidentifiable meat scraps. On good days, if the cook cooked too much or some of the prisoners left or died, we might even get a *Nachschlag* of soup. For supper we were given a piece of dark bread with a pat of margarine and maybe some beet jam. Prisoners often attempted to save part of their evening meal for morning since they would otherwise go without solid food for eighteen hours, but as often as not the carefully salvaged morsel would disappear at night, stolen by another hungry inmate. In order to avoid this, instead of putting the bread in our pocket we hid it between the shirt and the jacket. Then we could nibble at it through the night, making it last as long as possible without anyone else seeing.

Dinner was served out of a huge cauldron by one of the *kapos*. Although the *kapos* were prisoners themselves they had been delegated a certain authority by the Nazis; along with this added status they also took on many of the cruel and sadistic



tendencies of their masters. This was particularly evident at mealtime. Prisoners were single-filed to receive their ration, each with his spoon and bowl. After a time we came to know that the most coveted part of the soup, the sediment which might contain an extra piece of potato or a scrap of meat, was on the bottom; thus the last places in line were the favored ones. Occasionally a prisoner would slip out of line and go to the back in the hopes of getting a little more to eat. The kapos kept very close watch for this sort of thing. Nothing would be said about it until that prisoner's turn came. Then the kapo doling out the soup would slam the ladle viciously into the prisoner's bowl causing the soup to splatter in all directions. Sometimes this would be accompanied by a blow across the face with the ladle. The tears of frustration and despair in the prisoner's eyes would elicit smiles of self-satisfaction on the faces of the kapos responsible for them.

The kapos were not usually Jews, but convicts taken from the German prisons. Their armbands were green. Now and then there would be a Star of David on the armband too, indicating that the criminal was also Jewish.

The camp population at the time of our arrival was approximately one hundred and fifty, composed of our truckload and one other, plus a handful of camp officials. When we left Laurahütte nine months later the prisoner population had swelled to six hundred. Our barrack continued to house roughly the same hundred and fifty with which it started minus those who sickened and died -and two prisoners who escaped.

Laurahütte, like most German concentration camps, derived



its population from those whom the Nazis considered "undesirable elements." Several years earlier the Nazis had opened prisons all over Germany and dumped convicts, giving them very harsh training, en masse into concentration camps. Some of these had sifted down to Laurahütte; they were usually employed as kapos.

Other classes of prisoners were those the Nazis considered asocial elements, mostly gypsies, political, religious or sexual deviates and Jews. All of these groups were branded with their own badges called "winkel". A winkel was a narrow strip of white cloth bearing a colored triangle and a prison number. The color and position of the triangle identified the group to which the prisoner belonged. Thus political prisoners wore a red winkel, asocial prisoners, like the gypsies, a black winkel, religious prisoners, priests, Jehovah's Witnesses a purple winkel, homosexuals a pink winkel, minor criminals a green winkel pointed down. *Schwerverbrecher* (under life sentence for major crimes) wore a green winkel pointed up. Jewish prisoners were marked with a yellow star of David; sometimes the initial of their country of origin was superimposed on this. The kapos were usually drawn from the group of *Schwerverbrecher*.

At Laurahütte there was no difference in the treatment meted out to these different groups of prisoners although I presume that this was not necessarily true in other camps. With such divergent backgrounds among the prisoners there was, however, little unity and few friendships. Alliances such as that formed by Kupferman, Hajek, Gerechter and myself were rare. Most prisoners kept to themselves or stayed within their own racial or religious groups. Distrust, rivalry and hatred were the order of



the day. The Nazis preferred it this way; chances for troublesome uprisings were fewer when the prisoners did not trust each other.

So the groups tended to separate themselves; the gypsies - (we didn't have many) - stayed apart from the rest, as did the Communists. Occasionally there were those who ventured out and met us. There was one priest who became a friend. He was Polish and didn't speak German very well. I have no idea what he did to get there. There was also a Communist leader who became a friend, but that was rare. We didn't try to make new friends, either. When a group of Hungarian Orthodox Jews came, they kept to themselves, as well. Both their foreign language and their observant customs made them different.

This same kind of disharmony existed among the camp's administrative staff although they were all members of the same social group. They would steal from each other at every opportunity; only when one of their group was accused of some breach of conduct would they come forward with a kind of honor among thieves and defend the accused.

The major "thieves" who composed the camp's administrative staff were the *Schreiber* (Scribe), the *Lagerälteste* (camp elder) and the *Läufer* (runner). In conjunction with the *Blockälteste*, (block elder), these men and the kapos more or less ran the camp. They were of course subservient to the SS who at Laurahütte had little actual contact with the prisoners. In the last analysis, however, they all answered to the camp's Kommandant, *Oberscharführer* Walter Quackernack.

In order to understand life at Laurahütte it is necessary to understand the men who composed its administration, their





personalities and the manner in which they regarded and discharged their duties. First it must be remembered that, with the exception of the SS, all of the administrative staff was composed of prisoners and that none of these prisoners was paid for the work he performed. They were, however, compensated in other ways. Not only did they receive more and better food to satisfy them physically, but they were given certain distinctions to designate their rank and give them important psychological satisfaction.

Of the camp officials only the *Schreiber* and the *Lagerälteste*, the two kapos who had arrived with us, were exempt from wearing prison uniforms and sporting prison haircuts. They wore neat black jackets, striped pants and armbands. It was primarily the wearing of these armbands which distinguished them from prisoners and gave them status. The *Schreiber*, the *Lagerälteste* and the *Läufer* all wore black armbands with white lettering.

The *Blockälteste* and the kapos wore striped uniforms similar to those of the prisoners but of heavier material. They also had red armbands with white lettering. In this artificially leveled society where shaved heads and striped suits submerged all individuality these ostentatious insignia proved a great morale booster to the wearers. Unfortunately the feeling of power they derived from this distinction brought out the worst in most of them. From the Nazi point of view the system was an excellent one since it gave the staff enough satisfaction to assure adequate performance of their duties without any appreciable cost.

All of the camp officials were drafted from the "green



winkel" segment; i.e., the criminal element. Many of them had spent years in concentration camps and thus were wise in their ways. *Läufer* Jacoby, the Kommandant's personal valet, had been a sneak thief in private life and had been imprisoned for larceny. He had an uncanny way of suddenly appearing from nowhere without making a sound, undoubtedly a carry-over from his professional days. He was the youngest member of the camp staff, about twenty-eight years of age, thinly built, with heavy brows and sharp, mouse-like features. His most objectionable quality, his fondness for young men, gave me some very uncomfortable moments.

*Lagerälteste* "S" was a short, heavysset broad-faced German in his late thirties who had been a bricklayer before he was imprisoned for the murder of his wife. His lumbering gait, stern expression and the fact that he had a thumb missing from one hand gave him a rather forbidding appearance.

Prior to the time that "S" had joined us at Monowitz he had been interred at Oranienburg, one of the earliest and worst concentration camps for convicts. The survivors of Oranienburg or Sachsenhausen, a rather exclusive society, were the hardest kind of criminals. There they had received basic training in cruelty to other human beings.

*Schreiber Grande* was also a German, in his early thirties, short and slight. He had thick lips, a broad nose and protruding ears. In spite of these obvious physical drawbacks he was extremely vain of his appearance and spent a great deal of time combing and re-combing his thinning black hair. His bearing and demeanor were somewhat effeminate. Unmarried, he had a mistress who worked in the factory. This was common knowledge although



Grande never brought the girl into camp. Since he was free to come and go between the camp and the factory I assumed that the affair was consummated away from the campgrounds.

Grande also came to Auschwitz from a convict camp, although I never found out which one. He had been originally imprisoned for embezzling funds from his employer --ironically a Jew. Although Grande claimed that he was not Jewish himself his physical appearance as well as his personality traits made me doubt his statement. He had an amazing amount ofchutzpah.

It was of course expedient in those days to deny a Jewish heritage and Grande would not have been the only one to do this with some success. It was always difficult to know how much of Grande's stories were factual; he was a big talker but when one became acquainted with him it became obvious that much of his talk was merely bluff.

Of the SS staff assigned to Laurahütte the only one who had direct contact with the prisoners was the cook. He was a Silesian Czech, a big burly brute with a broad Slavic face, a stocky body and a vicious temper. He spoke, or rather barked, a broken "pidgin" German and wore a perpetual scowl on his ugly face. Because of his bestial personality, KP duty, although it offered the coveted opportunity of stealing extra food, was extremely unpopular. If the sight of one of the prisoners offended the cook he would think nothing of issuing the unsuspecting orderly a blow across the face either with his monstrous fist or with whatever object he happened to have at hand, be it a soup ladle, a knife or a pan. He kept an eagle eye on the rations; if food were stolen from the kitchen someone would go hungry that night



because the prisoners' quota would be cut by that amount. (Needless to say the SS always ate well regardless of shortages in the kitchen.) In order to protect himself and not appear slovenly to the administration, Cook explained the missing food as loss caused by mice.

The rest of the SS had little actual contact with the prisoners since they were confined to guard and sentry duty. One SS officer was stationed at the camp's gate and one at each of the three watchtowers. A twenty-four hour watch was maintained at all times.

*Oberscharführer* Walter Quackernack was the camp's Kommandant. Although he had traveled with us from Monowitz we did not really form an impression of him until after our arrival at Laurahütte. Tall, blond, well-built and ruthless, he was the very epitome of a Nazi officer. Perhaps this accounted for his appointment as camp commander since he was younger (about thirty-seven) and of lower rank (lieutenant) than most officers chosen to take charge of a concentration camp. In the early stages of Auschwitz, Quackernack had worked in the administration in charge of falsifying death certificates of Polish prisoners. At first people were sent letters saying that their relatives had died of illness or while trying to escape. Later in the war they no longer kept up this pretense. And, of course, there was no longer anyone left to inform.

He had also participated in some of the gassing.

Quackernack considered himself very lucky to have been given such an exalted and relatively safe position. Like most Nazis he was a bully and like most bullies he was really a coward. He was





deeply afraid that he would be sent into the front lines if his empire crumbled and thus did his best to keep the camp going.

Quackernack's idea of keeping the camp going did not, however, include devotion to his administrative duties. He delegated these to underlings, primarily the *Schreiber*, and spent his time strutting around the campgrounds in his shiny uniform. He was always immaculately dressed and accompanied by a black wolfhound that actually belonged to his girl friend, which he felt complemented his costume. The dog had been trained to nip at the heels of the prisoners as they went by for the entertainment of the officers. I was bitten by it more than once.

Quackernack and the dog could be seen daily strutting about the camp. By thus exposing his person, Quackernack calculated that he was earning both the admiration and respect of the prisoners.

The rest of his time was spent with his mistress, a factory worker, although he had a wife and two children in Germany, drinking anything and everything he could lay his hands on, and sleeping off the effects of both these past-times. All the SS had liquor rations sent to them from Germany but Quackernack supplemented his from the medicinal liquor kept in the camp hospital.

I became personally acquainted with *Oberscharführer* Quackernack shortly after our arrival at Laurahütte. For the first few days we were all given odd jobs in the factory on various types of machinery. About three days after our arrival the *Schreiber* came into our barrack and asked, "Does anyone here know how to make signs?"



Remembering the typists at Auschwitz who had been sent out to do heavy labor I kept still but a couple of French prisoners volunteered. They returned an hour later accompanied by Grande who was alternately kicking and cursing them.

You liars, you no-goods," he bellowed. "You don't know anything. You can't even make a decent letter."

His face was purple with rage and it took him sometime to quiet down enough to again ask if there were any sign makers in the crowd.

Feeling fairly certain now that he was really looking for someone to make signs, I decided to take a chance and volunteer, spoke up and said, "I do," ignoring the apprehensive faces of my friends.

"All right," he muttered.

"Come with me. But you'd better know what you're talking about."

I accompanied Grande through the heavily guarded main gate to the small building outside the campgrounds. In addition to lodging Quackernack and the SS this served as the temporary *Schreibstube* (office). The *Schreiber* gave me a pencil and told me to make some letters. When I had completed these he showed them to Quackernack who was pleased with the results. Without addressing me directly, he said to Grande, "Tell him to make a sign reading 'ACHTUNG -- HOHE SPANNUNG - LEBENSGEFAHR'" "BEWARE - ELECTRIC FENCE - DEADLY"

Grande gave me a can of paint and a miserable excuse for a paintbrush, a handle with one or two remnants of bristles, and I went to work.



Since that time I have made many signs but none have been a more painstaking job than the warning sign for a Nazi lieutenant.

Fortunately Quackernack was not in a hurry to warn the prisoners of their "Lebensgefahr" for I worked slowly and carefully wondering what I had gotten myself into and what would happen if he did not like the sign. Finally it was finished and Grande took it to the Kommandant. He was pleased with it and I was given several other small assignments.

That night when I got back to the barrack my friends were full of questions.

"How did they treat you?"

"Where did you go?"

"What is Quackernack really like?"

They were naturally very surprised when I told them that I was treated very well and that I was to come back the next day to do more work.

From that day on I had a steady job. The rest of our group was also assigned to permanent jobs but in the factory proper. Kupferman, who was an excellent typist, was put to work in the factory office, Hajek worked a lathe and Gerechter was first put to work as a cabinetmaker but later was switched to one of the machines. He liked the cabinet work since he was naturally artistic but disliked machinery.

Out of everyone in our group Arthur Gerechter was the most adversely affected by camp life; he could not adjust to it and withdrew more and more into himself. He loved classical music and he imagined himself on a stage in New York conducting an orchestra, like Toscanini. He lived in his own world.



Eventually, he became a *Muselmann*, one of the ghost people of the camps.

The *Schreibstube* staff was composed of Grande, myself, and Dr. Arthur Lehmann, another Jewish prisoner. He had been a bank president in Berlin. He came to us from Vught concentration camp in Holland where he was head administrator. Lehmann was a skilled typist and did most of the work which Grande should have done himself, such as making lists for outgoing and incoming transports, writing letters, etc. My duties were largely confined to sign-making and other forms of artwork. I became the "Resident Artist".

After my original success with the "Lebensgefahr" sign, Grande provided me with more and better materials for my work. One day Quackernack asked me to do a birthday card for a member of his family. By this time he was speaking to me directly rather than relaying messages to the *Schreiber*. He liked this so well that I soon found myself making cards for all sorts of occasions in the Quackernack family. Despite his carousing in the camp with his mistress, Quackernack was quite devoted to his family and seemed to miss them. On those occasions on which he talked about them he seemed almost human. Although he never became friendly he did leave me alone for which I was grateful.

If Quackernack left me alone, however, his personal valet, Jacoby, had quite a different turn of mind. Jacoby had a good thing in his job as *Läufer* and he knew it. He had access to more and better food from the table of the Kommandant; his job was an easy and undemanding one and at times he even had the opportunity of helping himself to the camp liquor supply. He would not have





been so objectionable if he had not been an overt homosexual who developed a great fondness for me. Due to our respective jobs we were thrown together a great deal, during the day in the *Schreibstube* and at night in the barrack. It was easy enough to repulse his advances during the day; the proximity to Quackernack's quarters exercised a restraining influence on him. He did give me one unforgettable night, however.

Jacoby slept toward the front of the barrack since he might be called during the night to run errands for Quackernack.

Due to his job he had rather casual curfew hours. On this particular night he came in late after the rest of us had gone to bed and was obviously quite drunk. He wandered past his own bunk, staggered down the middle aisle to the end of the barrack where we slept, found my bunk and propositioned me. In his condition one good blow on the head would have knocked him unconscious but it would also have finished me as soon as Quackernack heard of it. Knowing that Jacoby was not interested in any of the others I asked Arthur to change places with me. This maneuver threw Jacoby off temporarily but he soon found me again and I changed places with both Hajek and Kupferman in an attempt to elude him. Drinking had evidently brought out his persistent streak for he soon found me and the chase was on again. By this time I had run out of friends with whom I could change bunks so I began crawling over and under other occupied bunks until I found an empty one somewhere in the top. I crawled in it and waited. Apparently this stratagem had proved too much for Jacoby; he gave up and mumbling disgustedly retired to his own quarters. He wasn't nearly as disgusted as I was, especially after I found out that the bunk I



had landed in had no bedding, only a wooden board to sleep on. In order to get any sleep at all that night I wrapped my jacket around my bare feet, knowing from experience that bare feet make sleep impossible.

Except for disruption such as this one our daily routine was pretty much the same day after day. We were roused at four in the morning, sent to the latrine located in our barrack and told to wash ourselves from the waist up with cold water and camp soap. A kapo watched to see that this routine was diligently carried out. Although the population of Laurahütte quadrupled in the time I was there no additional toilet facilities were added. No one shaved of course since we were not permitted to have razors and thus we all wore scraggly beards. Once a month, razors were brought in and prisoners who knew, or thought they knew, how to give shaves shaved our heads and faces. The results were often painful, both physically and aesthetically.

Our morning wash-up was over very quickly since we were not allowed to linger in the latrines. One of the kapos' greatest delights was to chase prisoners out of the latrine in the midst of urgent private business. We were then driven out to the Appellplatz for roll call.

This was the kapo's opportunity to warm up for the day. One stood on each side of the doorway and as each prisoner passed he was struck in the face or on the head by a kapo's knuppel. I lost two teeth in this fashion. We then stood at attention, caps in hand clad in only our thin cotton uniforms regardless of weather, until the necessary business details were completed. Finally we were given our morning "coffee" and the factory workers were



lined up and marched through the gate. Work began at six o'clock. At noon the factory workers were brought back into camp and lined up in the *Appellplatz* for dinner; then they were returned to work until six in the evening. After supper there was about an hour for conversation until lights out.

It was during this hour that those friendships that were formed in camp had an opportunity to blossom. As I have said, friendships and alliances were few; the reason for this was twofold. First there was the lack of homogeneity among the prisoners that I have already pointed out; secondly the struggle for survival was so intense that it left little time or energy to give to friends. In camp "Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost" was not merely a saying; it dominated our daily lives. Every day brought a renewed struggle for enough food, enough drink, enough rest, for release from exhaustion, from stagnation, from punishment. We were devoted to one cause -- the conservation of our own strength and peace of mind. Close association and the resulting entanglement of loyalties had no part in this picture. We had already been cut off from our families and friends of the past; we were not anxious to suffer new heartbreak.

Nevertheless it was unavoidable that some association should be formed. The nucleus that our quartet formed gave rise to several "discussion groups" within the barrack. We were joined by Arthur Lehmann, my colleague in the *Schreibstube*; Basch, a Czech Jew about forty years old who was married to a non-Jewish girl and received Red Cross packages from the outside; a young Polish Communist leader, a tall, good looking youth in his early



twenties; and a very young Polish priest whose German vocabulary was limited to very few sentences. Basch later became a kapo and, although he left the group, he never learned to behave in a kapo-like manner and thus retained his popularity with the prisoners.

The subjects for these discussions were varied but always led back to the same theme -- "Will we get out and if so when?" We had of course no contact with the outside world, no books, no radios and no newspapers except those that were occasionally smuggled in from the factory or arrived in Basch's Red Cross packages wrapped around a sausage. No other prisoner received packages from the Red Cross; this was a mystery to me. He tried to keep most of it for himself, but he did give some of it away. I give him credit for that. We were all starving. He could have kept it all or traded it for privileges. He managed to survive the war and went home

From these bits of information we were able to piece together a little of what was happening on the outside. But since we were never able to predict the Nazis' reaction to the war news their behavior told us little about our probable fates. Of one thing we were certain; the Nazis would never let us fall into Allied hands alive. Thus our hope of liberation was always overshadowed by our fear of liquidation.

We naturally tended to focus on the positive, however, and often talked of the things we would do after the war and what we imagined the world would be like. Our Polish friends assured us that the Communists would take over and that we would all live in a Utopian society after that. We never talked about religion or any deity. In all the time I was in the camps, I never saw







anyone pray, not the Orthodox Jews, not even the priest. I think that it seemed pointless to most of us, since we were clearly all already in hell.

We talked about politics, about what was going to happen to us if we got out, what movies we had seen, books we had read, concerts we had been to. Never about our families; it was too painful. But everything else. That was what kept us together.

The Polish Communists along with the rest of the political prisoners spent only a few months in camp. They were removed by the SS one night before the Russians took over. I don't know where they were taken.

Arthur Gerechter did not have any definite political convictions. He was a confirmed lover of fine arts and especially of classical music, so while we talked, he lay on his bunk dreaming of a postwar Toscanini concert. He did not live to hear it.

Kupferman, Hajek, Lehmann and I naturally thought primarily of our families and how we would go about finding them after the war. While we didn't dwell on the past, we all tried to look ahead to a time outside the camp. Knowing that the chances of a family reunion were slim indeed did not prevent us from contemplating the only pleasant prospect we could conceive.

We needed these sessions to boost our morale; if, for a few minutes a day, we could escape into a dream world it helped sustain us when we were faced with the harsh realities of concentration camp life. These were sharply brought home to us one morning during *Appell*. As we were waiting groggily for our "breakfast" we were suddenly electrified by the news that two



prisoners had escaped from the barrack! Upon inspecting the bunks in which they had slept it was discovered that they had loosened the bricks in the wall behind them -- this must have been a labor of weeks -- and crawled through the opening into the unguarded street.

Now Quackernack was in his element! Someone in all this time must surely have heard the noise in the barrack! It did seem fantastic that no one saw or heard the preparations for the escape, but I never did. Quackernack singled out the prisoners who occupied the bunks closest to the escapees for the brunt of his inquisition. To refresh their memories he lined them up with their hands raised above their heads, within inches of the electric fence.

As they faced the fence, he marched up and down behind them shouting, "Schweinehunde... Jude.. wohin sind die Verbrecher verschwunden?" (Pig, Jew, where did the criminals go?)

"Did you know that they were going to escape?"

"Who gave them civilian clothes?"

"Schweinehund. . . ," He punctuated his sentences with blows on the prisoners' backs with his whip. Knowing that any one who toppled forward would be electrocuted added spice to the sport. Quackernack kept himself entertained for several hours in this way.

The rest of us were also affected by the escape. We were all lined up in the *Appellplatz* and made to sit on a stick in the ground. The sticks were approximate a half inch thick and twelve inches long. Our arms had to remain stretched out in front of us. After a few minutes sitting on the stick, it started to bore into



your flesh. To minimize the pain it created, leaving one arm stretched out we changed the position of the stick by using the other hand, grabbing the stick and switching sitting positions. Even in this position it was difficult to sustain the posture for even a few minutes, yet most of us stayed that way for several hours. Those who fell over or lowered their arms were kicked and prodded by the kapos and told to sit up for another round of torture. By the time we were released several hours later my arms and legs were so cramped I could hardly move them and my back ached from the neck down.

Nevertheless all the grilling produced no results. No one knew, or would tell, anything of the escapes. Yet it seems unlikely that they could have gone very far in their prison clothes or without any ID or resourceful outside help. I heard later that they had been found, but whether this was just a face-saving rumor started by the Nazis to discourage further attempts at escape I do not know. I think they made it. If they had been caught, they would have been brought back to show us how impossible escape was.

There was one more attempted escape after that. A sixteen-year old Russian boy, completely bewildered by what had happened to him, tried to hide in one of the open freight cars that left the factory daily. The anti-aircraft guns were sent out covered by a tarp. The boy hid under the tarp at the end of the day. It was a futile attempt since it was well-known by most of us that these cars were inspected before leaving the factory. He was discovered and automatically sentenced to death, the only punishment the Nazis meted out for attempted escape. He could



have been shot instantly but this was not the Nazi way. Executions were a form of public education and elaborate preparations were made for this one.

First the boy was taken to another camp since Laurahütte had no prison cell. He was detained there until a formal charge of attempted escape could be made against him. Then, handcuffed and heavily guarded, he was returned to Laurahütte for the spectacle of his execution. While the gallows was being prepared the unfortunate boy was quartered in the *Schreibstube* where I was working. Although he spoke only Russian, which I could neither speak nor understand, we somehow managed to communicate at that time. He managed to convey to me that he knew what was happening to him and that he did not care very much. As his last meal he was given an extra portion of bread and marched out to the gallows.

Executions such as this followed a pattern. They were always held on Sunday afternoon when there was no work, the entire camp was lined up in the *Appellplatz* where the gallows was erected, and Quackernack, immaculately dressed, stepped up and handed the execution order to the *Schreiber*, who read it in ringing tones.

Prisoners were always executed by hanging because this is more gruesome and less dignified than the firing squad. After the hanging was completed the rest of the prisoners were marched around the gallows and forced to look at the hanging man. I had had this experience before in Monowitz and this time it affected me as deeply seeing the dangling corpse of this innocent boy to whom I had been talking only a few minutes earlier.

Punishment for infractions of rules was handled in much the





same manner as executions. Quackernack would send a report of the infraction to Auschwitz, making it sound as severe as his whim dictated, and a few days later a recommended punishment would be sent back.

Punishment always meant whipping, just as executions always meant hanging. Again the whole camp was gathered to watch the proceedings. Quackernack would appear with his dog on a leash; complete with white gloves, polished black boots; you could see your face in them. He was followed by the *Schreiber* bearing the document with the sentence. Quackernack would then give the order and the *Schreiber* would read it aloud. Then the whip was passed to Quackernack; he handled it gingerly with his white gloves. I never saw him touch a whip with his bare hands. He then passed it on to a kapo who actually administered the whipping. For this purpose a wooden sawhorse was erected in the barrack; the actual whipping took place there. The SS and the kapos derived great pleasure from hangings and from these whippings; sadism always delighted them.

Later as I became a permanent member of the *Schreibstube* I followed Quackernack carrying the whip. When I was first told to carry the whip, I didn't say anything. I was afraid but I felt privileged at the same time. I was safe for the moment. No one treated me differently because of it or criticized me. This attachment to the authorities made me stand higher than the others and I could get more food for my friends. Survival was what meant most to us. When I visited Kupfermann in Belgium long after the war he thanked me for getting him food. In return, he paid for my hotel and other expenses.



The whippings and the executions were not the only punishment to which we were subjected. Nature added her share -- vermin. At Laurahütte there were no lice, so common in other camps, but there were large and vicious bedbugs (miserable creatures). In the summer they came out of the bricks in the wall where they had been hiding all winter. Soon all of us were covered with huge bloody smelly bites. The only method of controlling these beasts was hand-killing them; at this we soon became quite adept but we were no match for them. Our straw mattresses provided them with an excellent breeding place. The mattresses were of course never aired out. They multiplied more quickly than we could get rid of them and thus we could never keep up.

No medical care was given for the bites although Laurahütte boasted a staffed and somewhat equipped sick-barrack. This, however, was reserved for more serious cases. Generally speaking only those prisoners who gave promise of recovering and being useful again in the labor market were hospitalized, but we all felt that, once you went in there, you would never come out alive.

The sick-barrack staff had no nurses and only two doctors, both French Jews. They slept in the hospital barrack. They had more food and access to medicine and alcohol which they used to bribe the kapos. The medicine was limited. What was mostly available was medicinal alcohol, which was prepared as a cocktail by the doctors and consumed by Quackernack. Since Laurahütte never suffered an epidemic the sick-barrack was not put to its severe test; it seems doubtful that it could have handled



anything so serious because of its limited size and equipment. You went to the doctors for scrapes and cuts and for headaches. For anything more than that, you stayed there and that was the end. We were terrified of being ill enough to be put in the hospital.

It was probably pure luck that Laurahütte did not have the dysentery and typhoid epidemic so common in other camps; certainly we practiced only the crudest methods of sanitation. In the entire nine months of our stay in Laurahütte we had only one change of clothing issued to us. The rest of the time the only clean laundry we had was whatever we were able to wash in cold water for ourselves in the very limited time we were allowed to spend in the washrooms.

We came to Laurahütte in April 1944; by summer of that year significant changes were taking place in the camp. Since we had no radios or newspapers we had great difficulty in following the progress of the war. The factory workers could have obtained some information from the civilians with whom they worked but technically they were forbidden to talk to them; therefore they could only get the sketchiest kind of information and even that was colored by Nazi propaganda. Nevertheless, there were unmistakable signs within the camp itself that told us as much as any newspaper would have. For example, by summer 1944 the SS guards were being gradually replaced by Wehrmacht (military) personnel. The Wehrmacht, being older men, most of whom were veterans of World War I, were not useful in front lines whereas the SS, as Quackernack knew only too well, could be drafted any time.



There was a great deal of antipathy and jealousy between the SS and the Wehrmacht. There had always been friction between the Wehrmacht and the SS. The SS was the elite and they gave the commands to the Wehrmacht and the Wehrmacht resented it because they were the ones doing the fighting, at least at the beginning. The change also affected the staff of the *Schreibstube* for one of the new Wehrmacht officers came to join us.

At first I was naturally distrustful of M. -- after all he was a German officer -- although he was far from an imposing figure. Small, swarthy, with a patch in place of the eye he had lost in the first World War, he neither looked nor acted like a Nazi. M. was war-weary and thoroughly unhappy. He longed to get back to his family who lived not very far on a farm in Sudeten-Deutschland and sent him regular packages of homemade cakes and other delicacies.

It was not long, however, before I discovered that M was actually trying to be as kind as his position permitted. Sometimes he shared his food packages with me, furtively slipping me a piece of cake or sausage which I gobbled down in haste lest we should be surprised by a visit from the *Schreiber* or the Kommandant, who would look with horror at the camaraderie between a prisoner and a German officer.

M. was also useful in relaying war news. Quackernack kept a radio in his private quarters and permitted the SS and the Wehrmacht to listen to it. Occasionally, especially when the news had been bad for Germany, M would come out of the Kommandant's rooms and stand at the window of the *Schreibstube*, hands clasped behind him, looking outside towards the gate, ostensibly mumbling





to himself. Actually he would be relaying the war news to me, while I worked at my desk pretending to pay no attention to him.

"Don't worry," he would say. "The war will soon be over and you will be going home. Germany is being beaten."

"Bad news for the Germans" spread like wildfire through the camp and infuriated Quackernack. This was insult added to injury and he made the prisoners pay for it. In wild, drunken rages he would stalk across the camp grounds, scowling, cursing and striking anyone in his way. Many times we were exposed to a long diatribe during evening roll call when we were waiting, hungry and exhausted, for our evening coffee. Quackernack's oration on "Germany will win! Germany cannot be beaten! Our Führer will lead us to victory!" did little to fill our stomachs or soothe our spirits.

M.'s only official function in the *Schreibstube* was answering the telephone, a task which none of us, not even the *Schreiber*, was permitted. This gave him ample time to work on obtaining his discharge; approximately six weeks after he joined us he was successful in obtaining his goal and was sent home. His wish came through; he went back to his wife and farm. He was replaced by Officer Kruger who was as much Wehrmacht as Quackernack was SS.

Kruger was in his middle thirties, young by Wehrmacht standards, tall, well built, the exact opposite of M in action and appearance. His home was Berlin but that is all I ever learned of his personal life. Answering the telephone was deemed an insufficient occupation for a man of Kruger's obvious capabilities; thus a new position was created for him -- that of



*Arbeitsdienstleiter*. This meant that he was in charge of organizing the various work details to keep the camp running smoothly. With transports coming in regularly from Monowitz and Auschwitz the camp population was growing rapidly and some sort of coordination had become essential. As he had also been a WWI soldier, he resented the SS the same way that his predecessor, M. had. He was also friendly to me when no one else was around.

Although Kruger was friendly enough when we were alone his manner changed abruptly the moment a Nazi official entered the room. Because of this sudden reversal in his actions I never trusted Kruger and limited my dealings with him as much as possible. I thought he was afraid of being accused of being too easy on prisoners. Not until much later did I learn where his real loyalties lay. When the rest of the camp was evacuated in the face of a Russian invasion, Kruger stayed behind. Apparently, he deserted to the enemy. Someone told me then that he had always been a Communist and had been waiting for his opportunity to join the Russians.

Shortly after Kruger joined us another change took place in the *Schreibstube*. Construction of the half-finished building had been completed and this was to be our new headquarters. Quackernack was finally to have truly private quarters, shared only by the SS and the Wehrmacht.

The *Schreibstube*, the camp's tailor shop, the kapos' sleeping quarters, and in time, Lehmann and I were moved to the newer and larger quarters. We were now within the campgrounds and no longer made the daily trek through the gate. I was quite surprised when Grande told me that Arthur Lehmann and I would be



sleeping in the new building. That meant we would be housed with *Lagerälteste* "S" who told me one night in great detail, how he murdered and hacked his wife in pieces. It was during this frenzied attack that he accidentally cut off his own thumb! He seemed quite proud of his work. I tried to get a bed far away from him. The *Schreiber* and all the kapos were in there, too.

Though saddened by the separation from my friends I had to admit that the move provided certain definite material advantages which could not be overlooked and could, at least in part, be shared. In addition to freeing me from the daily cudgeling by the kapos, my new position enabled me to obtain some extra food and camp tobacco that I could take over to the barrack in the evening and divide among our group.

This sharing was not made easy by the other prisoners who were just as starved for food and tobacco as we were. Often when we were sitting on a bunk sharing a single cigarette by passing it from one to the other until there was nothing left to smoke, another prisoner would crawl under the bunk and wait with outstretched hands for the last fragment to be thrown away. If we were eating a piece of "organized" bread a group would cluster around us, their eyes devouring each morsel, their hands waiting for the tiniest crumb to fall. Sometimes Kupferman angrily gave them half a cigarette or a very small piece of bread just to be rid of them. It was impossible to share equally with one hundred and fifty others; had they had anything they would not have shared with us either. We were like animals in many ways; we fought for what we could get, asked no quarter and gave no quarter.



Until the opening of the camp canteen, "organizing" was the only means of obtaining any extra food or goods. "Organizing" was a camp term and a camp device. It was a combination of the beg-borrow-and-steal system by which things were made to appear from no known source. The most frequently organized items were camp cigarettes and extra clothing.

Camp cigarettes - real cigarettes were not even available for the SS - were a combination of tissue paper and machorka, a type of Russian tobacco that resembled tiny chips of wood. Kupferman "organized" a little tobacco from a civilian worker, a little saliva served as glue - and presto! a cigarette. When we ran out of both the essential ingredients we substituted newspaper and leaves; cigarettes were vital to our well-being since we smoked primarily to kill our hunger. Thus we had to be resourceful in obtaining them.

"Organizing" did not stop at obviously useful items, however. Since we never knew what was in store for us we fell in the habit of filling our uniform pockets with anything we found. A piece of string, a nail, a scrap of paper would be saved for a future emergency. Some of the prisoners even had crude hand made knives that they manufactured in the factory. One of the most popular "organized" item was the thin tissue in which oranges were wrapped for shipping. We never saw an orange the whole time we were there but the SS must have received fresh fruit from Germany for the tissues were quite common. They served a double purpose; they were not only useful as cigarette paper but also for toilet tissue which was non-existent in camp. For this latter use every piece of paper was carefully salvaged. "Man kann ja nie





wissen; man ist ja nur ein Mensch," - ("You never know; after all, we're only human.") - we would say philosophically while stuffing our pockets.

Shortly after the move to our more spacious quarters, Grande opened the camp canteen. For this purpose Quackernack supplied him with supplies from Auschwitz or Monowitz where a similar canteen was in operation. His stock was unvarying: camp cigarettes, combs, toothbrushes and a barrel full of "marinierte muscheln" - an inedible concoction of marinated clams in a yellow brown mustard sauce. Combs were a ridiculous item since all the prisoners' heads were shaved and even the officials wore crew cuts; toothbrushes were of interest only to the more fastidious inmates. The clams were terrible. They looked like a slimy mass regurgitated by a cow. Even a starved prisoner would not touch this. But the cigarettes were highly coveted. Grande knew very well that he could get rid of all the cigarettes he had, but not what to do with the other supplies; therefore he made only "package deals." As a result prisoners were loaded with useless items which they had to buy in order to obtain cigarettes. Nevertheless these things were hoarded against some future time when they might be useful as barter.

Because of my association with Grande I was exempt from the "package deal" ruling. The man seemed to like me. I don't know why, but I tried not to annoy him. I needed any help I could get to stay alive. We all knew that was all that mattered.

All purchases were made with camp money, which resembled Monopoly money in 1, 5 and 10 denominations. This money was good only in camp. Camp money was "bought" at camp headquarters in



Monowitz at a fixed rate of exchange with "outside" money, then distributed by Quackernack who did the "buying" via the *Schreiber*. The factory paid 4 or 5 Deutsche Mark per day for each slave laborer to the camp administration and in turn rewarded the good workers with camp money that could then be spent in the canteen. Different sums were paid to skilled and unskilled workers. The kapos, of course, received a larger share than the prisoners. The *Schreiber* and the *Lagerälteste* who could dip their hands in the trough any time did not need any fixed dole.

As far as I know there was only one exception to the ruling that all camp employees limit their dealings to camp currency: at Monowitz, where the girls who had been put in the brothel were paid in camp money but had the privilege of turning in this money for a certificate good for purchases on the outside. Presumably this was done because they needed supplies not available within the camp. They were also permitted to have new clothes and hair styling. This does not mean their life was easier than ours. The kapos, and the *Lagerälteste* and the *Schreiber* were taken on regular trips to Monowitz -- ironically under guard -- to take part in this phase of the "employee benefit" program. I don't like to imagine what those girls endured.

Two of my cousins were sent to brothels like these. Neither one survived.

Of all the camp employees Grande probably had the softest and most profitable job. Part of this was due to the extraordinary gall he exhibited in going after what he wanted. I particular remember one incident that illustrates his talents.

One of the civilian factory workers had a little dachshund



that prowled about the camp during the day waiting for his master to come out at night. Usually we ignored the dog, but on this particular day, either out of hunger or boredom, Grande and the *Lagerälteste* composed a plan for disposing of him. Grande enticed the dog into the camp, then threw some urine against the electric wire fence. The dog smelled the fence and relieved himself which resulted in the speedy demise of the dog. Grande took the dog to his quarters and cooked him. It smelled terrible but he gave me a little piece of the meat and it didn't taste bad; a little like horse meat without the sweetness.

Unfortunately Quackernack got wind of the episode and flew into a rage. Such a breach of etiquette was unheard of. Good public relations between the camp and the factory were extremely important and Quackernack grew wild at the thought of having to explain this shocking incident. In order to pacify him Grande invented a story concerning the dog's untimely end. He told Quackernack the dog committed suicide, he had mistaken one of the electric wires for a fence post, electrocuted himself and, after all, what good was a dead dog except to provide fare for the staff? Whether Quackernack believed this half truth or not, he accepted it because it got him off the hook.

Grande also had a rather interesting way of replenishing the stock in his canteen. This may not be a fair accusation since we could never really prove that there was any connection between business in the canteen and the regular raids - or inspections as they were officially called - on the barracks. The coincidences were, however, rather remarkable.

These inspections were held at frequent but irregular



intervals and always without warnings. Their only avowed purpose was to confiscate all personal items found in the barracks. Supposedly they were primarily directed at rooting out concealed "weapons" such as the home made knives some prisoners kept, but in the process all the carefully hoarded "organized" articles were found and taken. Sometimes Quackernack himself appeared at these raids but usually they were presided over by the *Lagerälteste* and conducted by the kapos. All canteen items, such as combs and toothbrushes (the mussels we disposed of in the latrine), were then turned over to Grande and resold to the prisoners from whom they had been taken.

Other than inspections, executions and corporal punishment there were few diversions in the camp. Only once, on a Sunday afternoon, the only time we did not work, someone produced a soccer ball out of nowhere and we played a match among ourselves.

We had little idea of the passage of time; although we knew when winter came but we did not know (or really care) about holidays or when Christmas arrived. There were no Red Cross packages, no respite from the work, no improvement in the food for the prisoners.

In late fall the guardhouse acquired a radio which blared most of the time with news bulletins. A fanfare, an announcement of troop movement towards the Russian front, proclaiming the Germans were winning the war, capturing this Polish town or village, then concluding with a military march.

We knew very little about the "outside" except for rumors and what we heard from the radio. Some of the Polish prisoners were listening very carefully which towns or villages the Germans







claimed to have captured. After some of these broadcasts, the Polish prisoners who knew the towns mentioned, said: "The Germans are not pushing forward; they are retreating towards us."

I found out that Christmas Eve had come through pure accident. There was no curfew for the administrative staff of the camp on that night; therefore there was no one to see to it that I was in my quarters and I was free to roam about the camp. The main prisoner barrack observed curfew as usual. Along with a few of the kapos I wandered over to the guardhouse where the sentry was supposed to be watching the main gate. The lights were blazing, the radio, loud as ever, played music and the unmistakable sounds of a party were coming towards us.

We stood outside and peered into the well-lighted windows. Inside was almost the entire Nazi staff of the camp, with the notable exception of Quackernack, crowded into the guardhouse's two tiny rooms. They were consuming large quantities of liquor and food such as we had not seen for several years. Somehow they had rounded up two girls -- who were now half naked and providing entertainment for them. I did not see the *Lagerälteste*, the *Schreiber* or Jacoby who must have been having their own celebration elsewhere. We watched the proceedings for about an hour, despite the cold, when one of the sentries came staggering out and told us to go away and mind our own business.

He didn't even wish us a Merry Christmas!

By that Christmas of 1944 Laurahütte had begun to deteriorate. The war was going badly for the Germans and the pressure on the Nazis was being felt most strongly by the prisoners. Although we didn't know it, D-Day had come and gone,



the Russians were pushing in from the East, the Americans and the English from the South and West. Quackernack was becoming more and more panic-stricken. He could already see himself in the front lines of a losing battle.

In order to wipe this unpleasant picture from his mind, he redoubled his drinking and harassment of the prisoners. Inspections grew more frequent and roll calls in the middle of the night became commonplace. Up to this time Laurahütte had been fairly free of this particular plague which was a common form of punishment in other camps. Quackernack had been too busy with his personal pleasures to call *Appell* during the night. Now it seemed that he never slept but devoted all his time, drunk or sober, to driving the prisoners. Often he would call roll just as we had settled down for the night just to keep us standing for hours in the cold listening to his abusive diatribes; his gentlemanly manners were beginning to desert him and he fell more and more frequently into the use of the vernacular. Then he would send us back to our bunks to be awakened again within minutes by reveille.

With sleep thus at a premium, food becoming worse and scarcer and the pressure of work increasing, sickness and depression among the prisoners increased. The factory at Laurahütte was one of the few still operating full time and thus highly essential to the German defense. Every available pair of hands was thrown into factory work. I was no longer considered essential in the *Schreibstube* and was moved to the factory. Because I was classified as a "*Schreiber*" I was not put to work on the machinery but given a desk job making out invoices, etc.



Another indication of the deterioration of the camp was the rapid increase in the number of *Muselmänner*. Just as the social and economic conditions of a city are reflected by the number of beggars on its street, the number of *Muselmänner* gave an indication of the conditions of the camp. The *Muselman* was the camp leper. The term, German for Moslem, came not from the Moslem religion exactly but for the word for beggars on the streets of India, thin and alien to us.

The *Muselman* was an outcast among outcasts; he was shunned by the prisoners who saw in him a reflection of what they might become. He was a person who within days or few weeks had dissolved into a walking corpse, robbed of his dignity, his emotion and physical well being. The *Muselmen* were hated by the administrative staff who singled them out as scapegoats. Because the *Muselmänner* were the weakest members of the prison population, unable even to perform their duties in the factory, they were the only ones left in the camp during the day. They were assigned menial tasks such as picking up papers and cleaning up the grounds. If in the performance of these duties their paths crossed with an SS man or a kapo they could always be certain of a kick or a beating. They were carefully hidden from the civilian staff of the factory since they would be very bad publicity for the camp. Once a week trucks came and took the *Muselmänner* away, presumably to add fuel to the furnaces of Auschwitz. One never knew who would become a *Muselman* or how long it would take. It was just another event we were all terrified would soon happen to us.

That the tide was turning against the Nazis was graphically



illustrated by the change in their drafting policy which took place about this time. Up to now one of the great sources of German pride had been its elite troop system -- the SS, SA, and Wehrmacht were all part of this. But the war had gone on longer than the Germans had anticipated and they were running short of "gentleman" soldiers. What they needed now was cannon fodder, pure and simple. But manpower was at a premium; all eligible men had already been drafted, the rest had been purged and were now either dead or imprisoned.

It was obvious that those who had been imprisoned by the Nazis for religious or political reasons could not be drafted into the German army. There was, however, a prison element, the *Schwerverbrecher* who were mostly sentenced to life imprisonment before the Nazis took over, who might be willing to take a bargain in order to gain a dubious kind of freedom in the army. Some of them had already proved their worth as kapos and members of the administrative staff and had received preferential treatment from the Nazis in return. Now the rest of them were given the choice: they could either join the German army or remain to work in the factory at Laurahütte. A few of the more adventuresome ones accepted the challenge. One told me, "I'll sign up but they'll never see me at the front."

It seems unlikely that any of them ever saw front line fighting; their only thought was to get outside the barbed wire and make good their escape.

By January 1945 definite preparations were under way for the evacuation of Laurahütte. The Russians were definitely headed toward the camp and the Germans considered the factory too





valuable to abandon. Plans had therefore been made to move the factory and the civilian personnel by train to Hannover in northwestern Germany. We were not certain that we would be taken along; however, we knew the shortage of labor from which the Germans suffered and suspected that our value in this area would be reason enough not to shoot us yet. We therefore began "preparing" for evacuation. This meant redoubling our "organizing" of seemingly senseless items that might be useful in that uncertain future. I had a piece of string about three feet long that I used to tie my shirt closed among other things. It was a treasure to me.

In general we were not enthusiastic about the prospect of moving. Laurahütte with all its obvious drawbacks had begun to mean a kind of insecure security. Barring a complete reversal of Nazi policy we knew that we would not be shot or gassed. We knew our jobs, our administrative staff, the strengths and weaknesses of the camp and how to circumvent them; in short we would rather have faced the discomforts of the known than the terrors of the unknown.

But we had little to say in this matter. We began to hear cannon shooting nearby and knew that the evacuation was about to begin. When the departure came we were called out to the Appellplatz for morning roll call, then told to gather our things. This in itself was a concession on the part of the Nazis; they could as easily have loaded us on the trains as we were. So again I was able to keep my glasses case with the photos of my family inside. That was luck, too. I never understood why they let me keep it but I clung to it as the only reminder of my real



life. Otherwise I might have begun to think it was all a dream.

Lined up on one side of the *Appellplatz* was a strange group of prisoners who apparently had come on a transport from either Monowitz or another factory and were also being shipped on. With much shouting and waving of clubs, the kapos herded us into a row of waiting cattle cars; filled each car with from fifty to ninety men and we were off to the next stop of our dark, dark journey.



## CHAPTER VI

### Exodus

Mauthausen, Hannover -- January to April 1945

The trip from Laurahütte to our first stop -- Mauthausen -- made the transport from Westerbork to Auschwitz look like a joy ride. Clinging to the sides of the rattling car, stomach empty, tongue parched, I thought of the warm clothes, the ample provisions, the playing cards and the harmonicas which our friends at Westerbork had provided for us. The Nazis, wanting to preserve us for more labor, had provided us with closed cars so we would not freeze to death in the January cold. With their customary perversity, however, they had failed to provide us with food or water for the four-day trip. In addition to the discomfort caused by this intentional oversight, the cars were so crowded that it was impossible for everyone to sit at the same time. There was much crowding and elbowing in an effort to find a reasonably comfortable spot.

Before we left Laurahütte I had been given the option of riding in a separate car with the kapos and the administrative staff or in a regular prisoner car with my friends. Despite the obvious physical advantages of going with the kapos -- they had organized food, water, blankets, etc. -- I chose the latter. To be consistent with the law of self-preservation I suppose I should have chosen to go with the kapos. Perhaps if I had known how arduous the trip ahead would be I would have chosen differently. At this time I cannot really say. Then I only wanted to stay



with the people I cared about.

The crowded condition in the prisoners' cars served to make stealing easier. Everyone was starving, of course. A few prisoners had managed to salvage a crust of bread from their last meal at Laurahütte and had carefully preserved this in their pockets. Yet, on the morning of the second day en route, one of the men who had been able to find a spot on the floor and catch a few hours sleep, reached into his pocket for his bread and found it empty. For a moment he stared into his empty hands in disbelief, then raised his voice in a cry that seemed to contain all the suffering and misery known to man. With that cry he took leave of his senses; he spent the rest of the journey cowering in a corner, chattering and mumbling to himself, occasionally bursting out with loud sobs and moans, completely out of touch with reality. He went from man to *Muselman* in the blink of an eye. I tried not to look at him.

Would I be next?

A kind of quiet panic took over the car after this incident. Plunder was the order of the day with prisoners stealing from each other even articles of no value. In every car there were numerous repetitions of the above scene. In our own car there were two or three more unfortunates who were unable to endure the rigors of the trip and left the world of reality for one of their own. Miraculously no one died; thus we were spared the additional horror of close confinement with a corpse. The other cars were not as fortunate, however; all of them arrived with a share of dead.

The experience of this trip had a profound effect on my





friend, Arthur. Always the weakest of our quartet, the strain of this trip told visibly on him. Physically and mentally he was deteriorating rapidly. A natural introvert, he now seemed to be pulling a sheet around himself and none of us was able to break through to him. I can only guess what went on his mind during the trip; although the four of us, Hajek, Kupfermann, Arthur and I, stayed close together we talked little because of the dryness of our mouths. Perhaps it would have helped all of us to share our feelings but we had neither the physical ability nor the desire for conversation.

During a refueling stop somewhere in Poland we attempted to slake our thirst by eating the snow outside the cattle car small window; the car had two slatted openings on the top and we scooped the snow from the wooden blinds. We then learned a hard lesson; snow --because of a certain saltiness in it-- does not quench thirst and left us only more parched than before.

Military trains had priority. They were going east and we were traveling west. Every time our train met a military train we would stop on a side track, sometimes for hours, to let the train pass.

On the second day our train stopped at a railroad station somewhere in Czechoslovakia. Next to us was a German troop train. As we waited we heard planes overhead. Some of the prisoners began praying for a bombing -- anything to end this drawn-out torture. But the planes were evidently a Russian reconnaissance fleet that only took pictures and went away. As we pulled out of the station, another train filled with prisoners in open railroad cars pulled in behind us. Before we were out of sight of the



station the Russians returned. This time they did not take pictures. They bombed the railroad station. We learned later that everyone in the station had been killed. It was pure luck again. If the train had pulled out a few minutes later, I would have died, too. At that point, I don't think I would have cared.

Around noon on the third day we stopped in Vienna. When we came into Vienna, it was gray and winter time, close to my birthday in January. There was snow on the ground, dirty snow around the station. I could see the street where I used to live but I knew my parents had long since been taken away. The last I had heard from them had been two years before, in 1942.

I broke out in a cold sweat. Almost exactly seven years earlier I had boarded the *Kindertransport* and happily shouted, "Good-bye, Germany" as we crossed the border into Holland. What an ironic twist fate had taken to bring me back here now, in this condition!

Our train stopped at the Nordbahnhof. From the opening of the car I could see the street where I had lived. I remembered the columns of goose-stepping Nazis that had marched down the street, the progrom, the good-byes from my family -- and looked quickly away. Kupferman and Hajek were also looking at their *Heimatstadt*. They did not speak; their thoughts were written on their faces.

Our train inched slowly forward. Presently a machinist came by to fill the steam engine with water. We stopped in front of the water tower that filled the steam engine. Seeing that life-giving liquid flowing into the cold steel body of the locomotive while our own bodies were being dehydrated was almost more than



we could stand. We begged the machinist for a few cups of water - even hot water -- for ourselves. He gave us a long, disdainful look and answered:

"I am not giving water to murderers."

Realizing that he mistook us for convicts we explained our plight, stressing that we were not convicts but Jews, many of us from Vienna, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, and that we had been without water for three days. He replied with another long distrustful stare, then turned on his heels and walked away. Silently we looked at each other. With his parched lips, Hajek spat in the direction of the city.

"That for you, miserable Vienna," he muttered.

We looked at the city that had once been our home with contempt and loathing. The man wouldn't give us any water! What would it have cost him? That was the cruelest thing I ever imagined. He might have been one of our former neighbors. I might have gone to school with his children. He thought we were murderers and cared even less for us when he found out we were Jews. I don't know if he was a Nazi or not. I don't suppose it matters. He treated us just as they did, as if we weren't human. God! That feeling never left me.

I knew then that it would never be home to me again. My family there was gone. The last letter I had received from my mother said that my father had been taken to a work camp in Poland and that she was going to join him. I didn't know if she ever found him, when or where they died. I only hoped they never knew that I, too, had fallen into the Nazi extermination machine.

On the fourth day we arrived in Mauthausen, just north of



Linz, Austria. Before the war Mauthausen had been a quarry. The Nazis had turned it into a *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp). Two months after the Anschluss they had transformed the abandoned stone quarry a few miles from the small town Mauthausen into a concentration camp for political and criminal prisoners. Even while I was still at Westerbork I had heard gruesome stories about Mauthausen and the thousands of form letters turned out by its administrative office for relatives of prisoners who were annihilated there. They all said the same thing.

"Your (brother, father, husband, son)..... was killed while attempting to escape."

In reality Mauthausen prisoners met their deaths in one of several ways - all provided for the entertainment of the Nazis.

Mauthausen was built on a steep and rocky butte. The first impression I received of Mauthausen was one of complete and - literally -- deathly silence. The aura of death was everywhere. It was freezing cold. The snow on the ground and the absence of noise gave it an eerie feeling. Everything was dark grey, the clouds, the barracks, even the snow appeared to be grey; you could not hear a door slam, the shouting of the Nazis or their boots stomping on the ground. Even the smell in the air was different. In Auschwitz there was the stench of human flesh burning; here it smelled like decomposed bodies. I felt as though each stone in that hillside was a tombstone and, in a sense, this was true. Many of them had carried prisoners to their deaths.

Although Mauthausen and the Hartheim castle near Linz had gas chambers and many prisoners were liquidated there in much the same way as in Auschwitz, the Nazis had devised another very





original system of mass murder utilizing the camp's natural resources. As part of their duties in the camp, prisoners were forced to carry heavy rocks up the side of the butte. A prisoner struggling up the hillside on the uneven one hundred eighty-six rocky steps with his burden would be greeted at the top by an SS man, sometimes drunk and laughing, who planted his boot firmly in the poor captive's face and shouted:

"Here comes another parachute!"

He then kicked the man and the stone back down the steps and into the quarry.

If the resulting fall did not kill him he was certain to be crushed to death by the weight of the rock he was carrying. And in the administrative office a clerk would type another letter informing a family that their father or husband or son had been killed while trying to escape

Later on they suspended giving out even that information, perhaps because of lack of time or too many non-official killings. It really didn't matter to the officers in charge. After all this camp and camp Gusen (a sub-camp) were "Nazi free-for-all" *Vernichtungslager*.

Eventually, of course, there was no one left to write, anyway.

Mauthausen actually served a dual purpose; it was both a labor camp and a liquidation center. There were underground airplane and ammunition factories near Linz where many of the prisoners were employed. The rest, most of them political prisoners, were liquidated in any way that suited the Nazis.

Knowing so much about Mauthausen did nothing to cheer our



spirits.

"Raus, raus, mach schnell!" the familiar command brought us back to reality. We were unloaded from the stinking cattle car, marched to a nearby building and told to take off our clothing. This order automatically meant disinfection and we therefore assumed that we were going to remain in Mauthausen until a boot was planted in our faces and we too, went tumbling down the side of the butte. Still without food or water, cold, shivering and exhausted, we were herded into the shower room for bathing and shaving, they told us. Most of us expected to be gassed then and there. We were only sure that it was not a gas chamber when warm water came out of the shower heads. Naturally we drank half our shower and were almost grateful for the Nazis' ridiculous cleanliness campaign. They were deathly afraid of catching any disease from the prisoners.

This kind of disinfection that-does-not-disinfect was part of the enrolling and registration process of every concentration camp except those, such as Laurahütte, which did not have the facilities for it. The clothing of all the prisoners, regardless of whether it contained vermin or not, was thrown into a large vat of lukewarm water that held only a little disinfectant and did nothing to clean the infested clothing; therefore, this process usually served only to spread the vermin equally among all prisoners. It was, however, cheaper than issuing new clothing.

Contrary to our suspicions and in spite of the involved enrolling process, we left Mauthausen the next day, but on foot. Still without food and water, we were marched to Gusen. I did



not know if it was Gusen I, II or III, all camps a few miles down from Mauthausen. Our route took us by that infamous hill where we saw a few prisoners going up the steps carrying a huge rock on their shoulders. We were grateful to be spared that but wondered if there were something even worse in wait for us.

Gusen was also known as a murder camp. We had heard many stories of the administration there. Mob violence and lynching prevailed; here the kapos took matters into their own hands without waiting for orders from the SS. A prisoner who stepped out of line would be found hanging from the barrack beams in the morning.

At Gusen we were again disinfected, showered and then driven naked and wet, kicked and beaten, through the snowy ground to the front door of a barrack. There we had to line up in a single file. It was so cold that the water droplets froze on my body. They kept us out there for hours. When we finally entered, at the end of the wooden barrack there were three SS men standing in front of a table holding a huge lamp. They were looking in every orifice of our body for lice. If a louse was found anywhere the unfortunate who had brought it in would be found the next morning hanging from the rafters. That went on for five days.

Finally, after the inspection was completed, we were given back our clothing and also some food and then quartered in the barrack. I never thought that a concentration camp barrack with its straw sack mattresses would look good to me but that night, after the days in the train and on the freezing roads, it seemed like home.

We stayed in Gusen only for the five days it took them to



sort us out. We were not put to work and thus spent our days in idle speculation of what was to come. Several times we saw the camp's *Muselmanner* gathered up, piled into lorries and taken away, probably to be burned. They were hauled off like so much trash. Kupfermann, Hayek and I tried to keep Arthur alert and out of the sight of the kapos.

On the evening of the fifth day we were again roused with the familiar words: "Raus, raus", and loaded on a transport train. We were glad to leave the murder camps but had we known that we were facing another four-day journey under the same condition as the last one I doubt very much that we would have had the courage to face it. This time the death rate was high. Our car was not spared. But, although we were all living skeletons by the time we arrived, the four of us were at least all still living.

The only food we had on this four day trip was given to us, ironically enough, by a prison. Our train stopped at Leipzig in the early morning on the second day of our trip.

There we were met by a group of volunteers who handed each prisoner a package of dry noodles contributed by the local prison. I remember being both surprised and touched by the offer -- surprised that the Nazis would permit us to receive any food and touched that the prison, which must have been short of food also, would relinquish part of their supplies.

We arrived at Hannover on the evening of the fourth day. Greeting us was a squadron of Allied bombers who were doing their utmost to destroy the city before we got there. They made us stay inside the train until the bombardment was over. We waited inside





the closed-in cars while the bombs dropped around us, not knowing whether we would stay here, move on or meet our deaths in these four-wheeled caskets. Finally the bombers left and we unloaded - stepping over the dead - and were marched a few miles to a camp.

By this time there were about two hundred and fifty of us left alive. We filled three small barracks. The section of the camp to which we were confined was separated from the rest of the camp by barbed wire. It contained five small barracks; two of these were used for Quackernack, the administrative staff, the *Schreibstube* and the kitchen. There was also a small *Krankenbarracke* (hospital ward).

The camp was located just outside Germany's industrial center of Hannover, three miles from the factory Hanomac, which had been a leading manufacturing firm of automobiles before the war. This factory had been converted to the manufacture of anti-aircraft parts and much of the equipment and personnel from Laurahütte had been moved there. The rest of the camp, the part outside the barbed wire, housed the civilian personnel, the so-called "freiwillige" workers - although at this point they may have been neither free nor willing.

At Hannover, the camp which was actually our destination, we were not disinfected. This, as we soon found out, was due to the almost total lack of water. What little water there was, was used for cooking, drinking and the very basic cleansing needs. With the help of all the incompetent disinfecting which we had endured since we left Laurahütte and the lack of sanitation facilities during the trip all of us were now suffering from lice and Hannover offered no possibility of getting rid of them.



With the exception of Herr Kruger, who had deserted in Laurahütte to join the Russians, we kept the same administrative staff at Hannover. This was the only similarity between the two camps, however. We did not have to be in Hannover long to realize that we had had a comparatively easy life at Laurahütte. Whereas the factory at Laurahütte had been located right outside the camp grounds, we now commuted daily -- three miles on foot, regardless of weather. Because of the distance between the camp and the factory we were given our main meal in the evening. At the same time we were issued a portion of bread which was our breakfast and lunch for the next day. Guarding this until we needed it became all important.

At Hannover there were no soft jobs; all of us worked on the factory machinery. They didn't train us at all. They just put me at a huge machine and said, "Get to work." There were German overseers from the last place. They just left me alone and gave me rags to clean the machine.

There was no pay, even in camp money, and no canteen to provide the little luxuries and necessities to which we had become accustomed. Cigarettes were almost impossible to organize; the raw materials were simply nonexistent. Food was becoming worse and even less plentiful, water was almost unobtainable; the work was hard. Quackernack, who could not spend his days drinking and sleeping at Hannover as he had at Laurahütte, devoted his free time to terrorizing the prisoners. Our spirits as well as our bodies had been seriously weakened by the strain of the past few weeks; our future looked bleak indeed. Most of us believed there was no future worth contemplating.



Added to the deplorable conditions of the camp itself were the almost daily bombings to which we were totally unaccustomed. Hanomac had become vital to the German war effort and thus became a prime target for the Allies. Although we were happy to see the Germans take such a severe beating we also feared for our lives. Again we were caught on the horns of the dilemma; would we be killed by our friends or our enemies?

The one redeeming feature of the very unpleasant situation at Hannover was the excellent opportunity the factory provided for sabotage. It was evident that the Germans were working in a kind of panic-stricken desperation. Although they always made extensive use of prison labor, they were now using unskilled workers on machinery requiring a good deal of technical knowledge. For example, I was working on a planer that used diamond-tipped knives. Knowing nothing about this kind of machinery it was easy to have "accidents" which broke these very costly and now irreplaceable knives. During my stay at Hannover I managed to do away with two of them. There was little need to fear reprisals at that time; our labor was too badly needed.

We seized the opportunity for sabotage with relish; up to now our retaliation against the Nazi oppressor had been mostly in the form of passive resistance -- a dogged determination to stay alive, to refuse to be conquered even though imprisoned. Now the time had come to advance a little, cautiously to be sure but with nearly assured success. A sense of timing and a sense of proportion were absolute essentials for survival in camp life. It was necessary to know just how far one could go at any given time without causing serious injury to oneself and to others. It was



not a time for splashy heroism. A front-page revolt was out of the question. Even if we had the means and a plan, none of us had the strength left. But the time was ripe for a steady chipping away at the Nazi war effort. By using the means at our disposal - delay and obstruction - we felt we were doing a little to repay them for their cruelty.

I had nothing to do now except whenever a kapo or a foreman came by. Then I grabbed a towel and pretended to clean the machinery. But the idleness reminded me how hungry I was. To relieve the pain of hunger I would take my leather belt and chew on it, just to get the stomach juices going and reduce the pain. It wasn't very convincing to my starved body.

By the end of March the bombings had become even more frequent and we could hear the sounds of hand-fighting nearby. We knew therefore that it would not be long before a decision concerning our fate would have to be reached and we correctly assumed that it would not be a favorable one.

As we returned from the factory one evening we found a number of prisoners digging a huge trench. It was as big as one of the barrack rooms. We stared at them in horror and disbelief, not daring to venture the obvious question. Finally I could stand it no longer. I went to the *Lagerälteste* and asked,

"Why are they digging that trench?"

He gave me a sharp look and answered with mock surprise, "Don't you know? For you, of course."

I stared at him, trying to decide if he was joking, knowing in my heart that he wasn't.

That night we slept with our grave outside our window.





On Sunday Kupferman was called out to help with the digging. The rest of us tried to stay away from the trench, otherwise we too would have to help. We confined ourselves to our customary Sunday occupation, picking the lice off our bodies and clothing. Only once during our stay at Hannover did we have a bath. At two o'clock one morning we were driven out of our bunks and into the shower room. We did not realize what was happening until we were inside and discovered that somehow the camp suddenly had hot water. We were all showered, again, like other times without soap or towel, and sent back to our bunks. This, of course, had no effect on the lice in our clothing. Thus we had become accustomed to spending our free time in hand-delousing.

On this particular Sunday we clung to our accustomed routine as though the performance of the ritual would somehow help prepare us for the terror that awaited. In spite of the very real and elaborate preparation for our deaths going on before us we were unable to grasp the reality of it; hunger, thirst and lice were immediate problems that we understood and could, at least in some measure, alleviate. The future, with whatever it might hold, would have to take care of itself; we had no jurisdiction over it.

There was bombing almost every night, lasting until dawn. When it started during the day, they didn't send us to the factory any more. We were sure that the next step would be for them to finally kill us all.

As it turned out the mass grave was not ours. It is probable that this was used after our departure to bury the sick who were left behind. In retrospect I realized that the whole



idea of a mass shooting was out of the question. There were no machine guns in the camp; the only weapons were a few rifles. At most Quackernack and his men could have shot a dozen prisoners before the whole camp would have rioted. Perhaps they had expected outside help for the liquidation, but it did not come. In any case when no mass execution had taken place by the end of March we were almost certain that we would be evacuated within the next few days.

The last day before we were sent away, the allied bombs fell all around us but didn't hit us.

Luck again.

A certain restlessness always stirred the air before any big change; thus it came as no surprise when, on the morning of April third, we were told to get our personal possessions together and line up on the *Appellplatz*. Since most of us now had nothing but the clothes on our backs, "gathering our possessions" did not take much time. I still had with me the battered case which contained my by-now-broken glasses and the pictures of my family. Otherwise my equipment was the same as everyone else's: a prison uniform consisting of shirt, pants, jacket, a pair of rags the size of a big handkerchief that substituted for socks, worn-out shoes and a tin bowl and spoon. Thus equipped we set out for our last march.

There were no longer four in our group, however. Shortly before the evacuation of Hannover Arthur's strength had given way. For a time he joined the *Muselmänner* of the camp, mostly unaware of anything around him. Then, seriously ill from malnutrition, he was confined to the *Krankenbaracke*. We visited



him when we could but they were cheerless visits. We all knew too well that he would never leave the hospital alive; there was little to say. During the time allowed for getting our things together, Kupferman slipped away to bid our farewells to Arthur. I could not go. Kupfermann said that he spoke to him, but I resisted. Thinking of him and that mass grave we were leaving behind, I could not talk to him. I couldn't go in with all those people who looked liked *Muselmänner*. I didn't want to see what I would become.

I was very close to it then.

After we lined up in the *Appellplatz* we were each given a loaf of bread -- nearly four times our usual ration -- half a cube of margarine and a serving of beet jam. The generosity of this dole should have been an indication that we were in for a long trip and that this was probably all the food we would get. But this was more food than any of us had had at one time in a number of years. Hunger and greed combined to produce some very foolish actions. Several prisoners gulped down the entire ration at once and became violently ill. Someone stole a piece of bread from another prisoner and a fight ensued.

At this point Quackernack intervened. For the first time since I had known him I saw him as he really was, stripped of all formalities, of all the external embellishment, minus even his precious white gloves. As soon as the fight broke out he whirled, whipped out his ever-present pistol and shot both prisoners down in cold blood. He looked around once to see if anyone else cared to start an argument. Then, satisfied that no one held any such intentions, he stuck his pistol back in his holster and without



as much as a backward glance at the dead men, went back to the business of organizing the evacuation. At noon on the third day of April 1945, approximately two hundred ragged, emaciated survivors of Nazi tyranny guarded by a handful of kapos, SS and Wehrmacht officers set out on foot for the evacuation of Hannover.

Many were never to reach their destination.





## CHAPTER VII

### THE DEAD AND THE DYING

#### The Death March and Bergen-Belsen

Everything that has been written about death marches is true. They are the extreme unction of sadism. When starvation, overwork, deprivation and torture have all been judiciously applied and have still left the shred of a human being, the death march becomes the final rite, guaranteed to obliterate every remaining vestige of strength and dignity and leave in its wake only the dead and the dying.

During those bitter hours that we spent tramping down that lonely German highway we had to remind ourselves again that we really wanted to go on living; that there was any reason to continue fighting for existence. We refused to think that we might starve, die of thirst or fatigue, never reach the end of the march or die when we got there. Instead we tried to keep up each other's morale, strength and courage and pretend that we would soon be liberated.

The conditions of the march are almost indescribable. We had of course only the clothes on our backs, most of which were torn, filthy and full of lice. Our shoes were totally inadequate for walking; after the first day's march many prisoners were barefoot. The rations that we had been given in Hannover were all the food we had for the two-day march in spite of the fact that the entire kitchen supplies from Hannover had been loaded on a *Bauernwagen*. This was a wooden cart commonly used by farmers for hauling hay and which was traveling with us. The cart was designed to be pulled by a horse or a mule but the lack of such



farm animals meant that various prisoners were assigned the task of pushing and pulling although most of us had all we could do just to push ourselves along. Quackernack stayed close to the cart at all times.

We were guarded on the march by Quackernack, several kapos and Wehrmacht sentries carrying rifles, bayonets and revolvers. We marched in columns of four or five; Kupferman, Hajek and I made a concentrated effort to stay together throughout the march. It was only at this time that I really learned about them. Before we had avoided saying much about the families we had left behind but now those memories were all we had left. Hajek told us about his wife and baby daughter, left behind in France, Kupfermann and I shared stories about our families. I wondered if I would ever find my brother, Leo, in America or know the final fate of my parents.

Bringing up the rear of this ragged parade were Jacoby and a row of sentries. They served a very important function. Whenever a prisoner was unable to go on, due to fatigue, illness or hunger, a sentry would take him into the bushes by the side of the road, dig a shallow hole, plant one shot into his neck and kick him into his grave. Jacoby would then bury him by throwing on a little dirt. The roads on which we marched must have been peppered with such makeshift graves. Anyone who lagged or dropped back signed his own death warrant. The steady rhythm of our shuffling feet was punctuated with unsettling frequency by a moan, a scream, a sob..., and a shot.

Although the prisoners had with them only those possessions which they could wear or carry, I still had my precious glasses'



case with the pictures in it; the sentries had carefully packed suitcases. Since they too were on foot and not eager to carry their own luggage they made porters out of the prisoners. One of the sentries handed me a suitcase also. I carried it as long as he had his eye on me but gradually I faded further and further into the middle of the marching column until I was able to slip out the other side and drop the suitcase by the side of the road. Then I slipped back into line, being careful to stay in the middle where I could remain almost hidden. I took my glasses off so that I would look less conspicuous. From time to time I could hear shouts of, "Where is the boy with my suitcase?" but fortunately it soon grew dark and my sentry friend could not find me. I suspect that he couldn't tell me from all the other prisoners. Walking skeletons all look much alike.

It seemed as though even the elements were determined to add to our miseries for, toward evening, it began to rain, a steady monotonous drizzle that soaked our clothing and dampened our spirits even further. It was a dark moonless night and we were not allowed to puncture the darkness with cigarettes so even that little pleasure was denied us. We stumbled along, hardly able to see our own feet, cold, hungry, wet, exhausted, lice-infested, and afflicted with sudden uncontrollable attacks of diarrhea. It seemed as though the two most common plagues of concentration camp life, vermin and disease, which we had been able to control at least to some extent up to now had caught up with us during this hellish hegira.

Coping with diarrhea and lice when one has to keep moving constantly is almost impossible and cost the life of many



prisoners on the march. I thought I might be spared at least the former but evidently I too had over indulged at the generosity of our pre-march rations and had eaten too much margarine and jam; in any case I suddenly became afflicted with violent stomach cramps. Knowing that I could not drop back without being shot I ran to the front of the line, squatted by the side of the road and scurried back through the lines to take my place with Kupferman and Hajek. I doubt that it is necessary to dwell on the condition of our clothing and our bodies after several hours of this kind of activity.

On one of my trips back into line I wasn't quite fast enough and one of the Wehrmacht guards caught me with the tip of his bayonet. This caused a gash just below my left thumb that soon became a favorite watering place for the lice on my body. Later I received a similar wound on my left thigh; keeping the lice off both festering sores became impossible and eventually, I stopped trying.

In order to take our minds off the strain of the journey as much as possible, Kupferman, Hajek and I continued to comfort each other by talking of all the pleasant things we could think of. We talked again of our families, wondering what had become of them. Would we ever see them again? None of us was very optimistic about our own futures but each one of us assured the other that he would surely be reunited with his family, hoping they were still alive. Even though we did not really believe what we were saying the conversation did help to take our minds off the desperate thoughts we would have entertained otherwise.

Supposedly Quackernack knew where we were going but either





his sense of direction was not very good or he too began to feel the weariness of the march for he repeatedly asked the sentries,

"How much further?

Once we stopped while he asked directions of someone. This was the only stop we made from noon until midnight. When we finally stopped for the night we were quartered in a barn. I wondered what the farmer thought when he saw his barn again-filled with filth, excrement, blood and dead bodies of starved and beaten men.

It was truly a night of horror. Since it was pitch dark by the time we arrived in the barn we held hands to keep from getting separated. Only the prisoners were quartered inside the barn; the sentries remained outside. Despite the rainy weather the latter location was preferable. There was much noise, confusion and disorder in the business of getting settled down for the night. The sentries, who were all getting very nervous and extremely quick on the trigger shouted:

"Ruhe! Ruhe! Ruhe! Ruhe!...;" (Quiet, Quiet, Quiet)

When this produced no results one of them fired several shots through the door. He hit a young Pole in the stomach, killing him instantly. Years later Kupferman told me the ironic details surrounding this incident. Before we left Hannover this prisoner and his father had worked together in the factory; however the father had been beaten to death for some infraction. Before the body could be taken away, the son had then removed the gold fillings from his dead father's mouth in order to exchange them for bread from "sympathetic" Germans but Quackernack had gotten wind of the affair and had taken the gold away from him.



To us this act seemed to go beyond survival. It made the boy the same as the Nazis, using his father's body as a commodity. That was more frightening than becoming a *Muselman*. It seemed almost perversely just that it should have been he who stopped the Nazi sentry's bullet.

There were more shots fired at random intervals during the night. We never knew when they would start up again.

The three of us slept huddled together in a corner as far from that fire-spitting entrance as we could get, never certain that the next shot would not hit one of us.

This was not a restful night.

In the morning we were off again. In addition to the young Pole and other prisoners who had been killed by random shots we left several victims of starvation, exhaustion and disease. We must have been a sickening sight as we crawled out of that barn-bearded, dirty skeletons, wrapped in rags soaked with blood, sweat and excrement.

We ate what little rations we had left and set out again. The sun had come out and was drying our clothes but some of them were too ragged and filthy to endure any longer. Finally and with reluctance I decided to dispose of my shirt. Perhaps it was here that I finally lost my precious glasses case with the photos of my family. It shows how far gone I was that I didn't notice its loss until long after we had arrived at the end of our journey.

Although the cart was still full of food we were not given any more rations and by this time even our hunger-accustomed stomachs were crying for food. At one point a young Hungarian boy and I were assigned to pushing the cart. The sight of all that



food was too much for him and he made an attempt to steal a loaf of bread. Quackernack, however, never stayed far from the food supply and caught the movement. Although the poor boy vigorously denied his crime, he was, at Quackernack's orders, immediately put to death. Later another young Hungarian met the same fate. But, in this case, his fellow country-men, who were a very strong and loyal group, managed to get that boy's body away from the Nazi cleanup crew and half dragged, half carried him along for miles before the strain became too much for them and they reluctantly had to surrender him for a hasty burial.

At noon we made a rest stop but were given no food. Some prisoners still had rations but naturally they did not care to share them and no one even tried to force them. By this time it was hard to say whether the guards or the prisoners were more jumpy. Nerves were becoming more and more frayed and tempers flared. Several prisoners attempted to escape but were caught and severely beaten by the guards. Shots were becoming more and more frequent and morale was sinking even lower.

During the afternoon of the second day we came to a small town. We saw the unmistakable signs of previous human trains like ours, the discarded clothing, debris, etc. There were also signs of former military installations; the remnants of trenches and barricades were still evident. The townspeople also seemed to be accustomed to seeing prisoners passing through; several women came out their houses with pans or pitchers of water which they offered us to drink. Although we were surprised and touched by their goodwill we were unable to take advantage of it; the Wehrmacht and Quackernack slapped the pans out of their hands and



pushed aside the prisoners who crowded around to drink.

I never learned to understand that kind of senseless brutality; nothing would have been lost or gained by the Nazis if a few parched prisoners had had a drink of water.

We still did not know our destination but somehow a rumor got started that we were going to Celle, an industrial center about twenty-two miles northeast of Hannover. We expected the prisoners who had traveled the road before us to have arrived at our mutual destination and became quite confused when we met a group going the other way. We never found out where they were going or where they had been.

To add to our confusion, late in the afternoon we skirted a large city that we thought was Celle but we did not stop there. Soon we saw signs of what looked like a concentration camp and wondered if the prisoners whose path had crossed with ours might have come from there. Twilight was approaching rapidly and it became increasingly difficult to see anything, especially for Kupferman and me since we were both nearsighted and unable to wear our broken glasses. All we could distinguish were yards and yards of barbed wire. Behind it was what appeared to be a large mass of greyish matter. At first we did not believe our eyes; then gradually, as the too-familiar smell hit our nostrils I turned to Kupferman and murmured,

"Leichen?"

He nodded in agreement. Corpses. What my myopic vision saw as a number of huge snowdrifts was really the final detritus of the Final Solution. There were hundreds and hundreds of unburied, uncovered bodies piled inside the camp!





At this moment the sentries cried, "Halt!" and we were herded into an empty barrack, inside the barbed enclosure. It was pitch dark inside and we stumbled around quite a while before ascertaining that there were no bunks. So we just found a spot on the floor and collapsed. By this time it did not matter that we had no beds, no food and no water. We had nothing to look back on except misery and nothing to look forward to except to join that mass of decomposing bodies outside. We fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion and despair. I had only one shoe left, no shirt, no handkerchief/socks and no glasses. I was crawling with lice.

The following morning we were lined up outside for *Appell*. This was done by a local kapo. Quackernack and the administrative staff we had brought with us from Hannover, with the exception of a few kapos, had disappeared. Their mission was evidently fulfilled and we never saw them again. For three hours we were kept standing before we were given any food. It was just a bit of bread, no soup. Then, finally, we were told where we were. We had landed in one of the Nazi's most notorious murder camps, Bergen-Belsen.

#### BERGEN-BELSEN - END OF THE ROAD

After we had eaten we were lined up for work duty. Of course none of us was in any condition to do any work but that didn't matter to our captors. We were each given a piece of string about six feet long, and led by a kapo to one of the other barracks. As soon as he opened the door an overpowering stench of



dead bodies emanated from it. Our assignment consisted of tying our strings around the hands of a corpse and dragging it behind us up the camp's main street to a mass grave about fifty feet long, twenty-five feet wide and ten to fifteen feet deep.

The bodies were so decomposed that it was impossible to identify them even by age and sex. Thus we never knew whether we were burying a man, woman or child. When they gave us the string to drag out the bodies we were so numb that we did it without thinking. But after the second time I realized that I didn't have to do this. There weren't enough guards to oversee us and so I just disappeared until we were rounded up to go back to the barrack.

From there we could see the section of the camp where the women and children were housed, or I should say penned, and noted that there must have been thousands and thousands of people still there. Until that moment I had no idea of the vastness of Bergen-Belsen's population. I still don't know how big it actually was but it must have been far greater than anyone had previously imagined.

In the evening we were given a bowl of soup and driven into the barrack. Since there were still no bunks and no lights, we slept huddled together, cramped and crowded on the dirty wooden floor, a thin blanket wrapped around our bodies, our food bowls near at hand, just in case. There were no toilet facilities in the barrack and thus the bowls did double duty. If a prisoner had an attack of diarrhea during the night, and we were all suffering from this now, he would grab a food bowl, no matter whose, use it for a toilet and then empty it either on the floor or, if his aim



was bad, on the face of a sleeping companion. If some paper could be found the next day the bowl was wiped out and used again for soup. Water was so scarce at Bergen-Belsen that it was never used for washing. It was also contaminated so drinking it was unsafe as well.

The toilet and washing facilities at Bergen-Belsen were so skimpy as to be almost nonexistent. There was a bathhouse with water faucets but only muddy water emanated from them, probably from lack of adequate drainage. I shudder to think what the inside of the kitchen looked like; although it was located directly across from our barrack I was never inside it.

The camp's toilets consisted of several long bars with uncovered pits behind them. One of these was located about fifty feet behind our barrack. There was also a toilet house—now abandoned—which Kupferman, Hajek and I used later as semi-private sleeping quarters.

I was already suffering from a slight case of diarrhea when we got to Bergen-Belsen. By the second day, when I knew the kind of work that was expected from us, I tried to "goldbrick" as much as possible by spending an exaggerated amount of time at the makeshift toilet and dawdling about the camp. In this way I was able to fritter away about half the day before a kapo caught up with me and told me to get back to work.

Vaguely I realized that we were all in varying stages of becoming *Muselmänner*. We didn't walk any more; we stumbled. We talked but rarely made sense. Most of us no longer cared what we ate or drank; the perpetual growl of hunger in our stomachs had been replaced by a feeling of two huge whetstones grinding away



at the lining. Some of the prisoners had already eaten garbage—the turnip peelings that the cook had thrown out the kitchen door. To get to these they had hurled themselves over a barbed wire fence, then thrown themselves on the peelings like a pack of hungry wolves, gobbling them up furiously until a kapo drove them back.

The sight sickened me more than my hunger.

Thus far I still had been able to keep away from the overwhelming but dangerous urge to eat and drink anything in sight. The Nazis wanted to make us animals, the sub-humans they believed us to be. Something deep inside me still fought back, although there was barely a spark of resistance left. I lived for the evening soup; it was food and drink, hope and deliverance.

"Tomorrow we will get another bowl of soup," became our watchword.

We were marking time and gambling with fate.

Which would come first, death or the liberation?

There were times when we nearly answered the question for ourselves; times when the urge to jump into that pit with the dead, mingle with that mass of grizzly, decaying bodies, to surrender to death became almost overpowering.

Then we had to focus very, very hard on "soup" and "liberation" to avoid willful self-destruction. Hajek often said that he only wanted to live to see the liberation; after that he didn't care what happened to him.

At night we tried to sleep, to forget for a few hours the miseries that haunted us during the days. To add to the hazards of the night the lice became most active then. I don't know what





they found left to gnaw on for we were all literally nothing but skin and bones, but evidently we still had enough blood left to present them with a meal.

For a week we went on this way. All the time we could hear cannon shooting nearby. The atmosphere of the camp changed gradually. The routine became more relaxed; the second week we dragged only one or two bodies a day and hid out the rest of the time, looking for something to eat and to smoke, even if it was only a tree leaf that we could light. Gradually the SS was disappearing from the camp. The sentries were replaced by Hungarian soldiers. The only kapos remaining in our barrack were Jewish kapos who had come with us from Hannover and who were not strict in enforcing discipline.

The nights were becoming warmer and clearer now that spring was definitely here and Hajek, Kupferman and I took advantage of the nice weather to get out of the barrack and sleep outside. On those nights when it was too cold to sleep outside we took refuge in the toilet house.

Many of the prisoners had also taken to living outdoors; on the women's side of the camp fires could be seen nightly. They sat around them in groups presumably cooking something they had organized. The men too had taken to cooking outdoors. One night one of the older prisoners offered me a piece of meat that they had cooked. It had been so long since I had seen any meat that I ate it gratefully.

Later I learned that my meal had been part of the unburied corpses.

All this time the shooting was coming nearer. By Saturday



of the second week in Bergen-Belsen we could see trucks and tanks going by but were unable to tell if they were Allied vehicles advancing or Germans retreating. Although we were fairly certain that the liberation was now merely a matter of hours we didn't talk about it. Instead we went to sleep each night still thinking about the next day's soup. So much had happened to us that we really could not imagine absolution from suffering; we felt it safer not to dwell on it. Our systems were not in condition to cope with an emotional orgy of joy.

On the following day, Sunday, April 15, 1945, the shooting stopped. Suddenly it was very, very still in the camp. We waited but no kapo came with food. Presently the stillness gave way to a blast of voices and the sound of many people screaming. A few minutes later we saw where the voices were coming from. A sound truck carrying loudspeakers came into the camp. It was followed by several others, all of them carrying the same message but in different languages:

"We are the English. We have come to liberate you. We will give you food and medical care but you must stay in camp because of disease."

So this was the liberation!

Now the prisoners went wild. Looting started. Some of them must have discovered the storeroom for suddenly prisoners appeared carrying suitcases full of watches and clothing. What they planned to do with them was a mystery. Just the idea of having possessions again was enough.

The kitchen was also raided. For the first time since we started our trip from Hannover I saw a whole loaf of bread.



Kupferman, Hajek and I were too weak to take part in the raids. We sat on the ground and waited until a kapo came by and handed us three tins of food. They were ration tins; the first contained cigarettes, biscuits and candy, the second corned beef and the third lard. Despite the lack of available tools we managed to pry the cans open, largely with our teeth, and wolf down the contents. Naturally, we got violent stomach cramps almost at once.

We were most anxious to light the cigarettes but had no matches, so Kupferman went out on the main street and asked several British soldiers for a light. Every one of them refused him. I do not know what prompted the refusal, perhaps they were afraid of being infected. But at the time it seemed like one of the cruelest action we had encountered in our concentration camp experiences. Although we had only been free a few minutes we had already taken on a new set of values; we were once more human beings with certain inalienable rights, and one of these was a light for our cigarettes. Being refused this by our friends and our liberators was a slap in the face.

When we finally got a light from another prisoner we found that the taste of a real cigarette left us very dizzy. But dizzy or not we were determined to seal our first taste of freedom by taking a stroll down the camp's main street. One of the first sights that met our eyes was that of several former prisoners, armed with sticks and everything else they could find, herding along the German sentries who were busily cleaning up the camp and hauling corpses with the aid of a conscripted *Bauernwagen*. We were much too tired and disgusted to join in this sport and



observed it only from the sideline.

Now all the barriers between the men's and women's camp were down and they were intermingling freely. I saw a girl I had known in Westerbork and went up to her to say hello. I nearly had my face slapped for this overture. Since my appearance had altered considerably since Westerbork days she failed to recognize me and thought that my intentions were of a different nature. Much impromptu lovemaking as well as rape had been going on all over the camp since the liberation and her wariness was understandable.

On the following day we were again given rations, lard, meat, and powdered milk. Again we ate ravenously and suffered acutely from diarrhea. By now the entire camp was full of excrement. No one even bothered to use the makeshift toilet any more and the resulting filth may be imagined.

Still we received no medical attention. Hajek was the worst of our group and needed care badly. He was hardly talking to either Kupferman or me and took the excitement of the liberation he had waited so long to see passively. We were still making our quarters in the empty toilet-house; on the second day after the liberation we awoke in the morning and tried to rouse Hajek. It was too late. He was dead. His only wish had been to see the liberation; after that his strength had left him.

Kupferman, I, and several others took him outside and laid him with the rest of the dead. There was no place to bury him. He lay there a long, long time.

There is one strange epilogue to Hajek's story. When I came to Portland I joined a social organization called the Portland





Friendship Club, formed by a group of prewar refugees - mostly German and Austrian - to help later arrivals, such as myself, adapt to their new country. Among their varied activities were original variety shows, similar to the *Bunte Abende* that we held in Holland. One evening, as I was performing one of the skits, I saw a man walk in who looked exactly like Hajek. I stopped dead and gaped at him. I said to myself, "It's impossible. The man died next to me. "

I was sure it was a ghost.

So I walked up to him and said, "Is your name Hajek?"

He said, "yes."

"Did you have a brother?"

"Yes, a twin brother."

I couldn't believe it. I was completely floored.

So I told him, "I knew your brother, I was with him when he died."

That's all I could tell him at that time; the memories were still too hard to face. But years later I began talking to school groups about my experiences and I felt I could stand to talk again to Mr. Hajek. He told me that Hajek's daughter was still alive and she wanted to know what happened to her father but she didn't speak English, only French. So I gave him part of this story and he took it with him to her in France. I'm glad she survived and hope it helps her to know that her father died with friends.

After Hajek's death we had to find other living quarters; neither of us could stand to go back into that death cell. With several others of the camp's inmates we set out and found an



abandoned storeroom a few hundred yards from our barrack. There we set up a crude form of housekeeping with the food we were given and some blankets we had organized. We were growing weaker by the hour now; Hajek's death had made us all wonder if we had been liberated only to die. We could see Red Cross trucks going through the camp but no one came into the storeroom. Once in a while a half-dead inmate would crawl through - very few were still strong enough to walk upright - clutching his plundered loot to his body. They neither looked at nor spoke to us; they were merely using the storeroom as a pass-through.

On our eighth day in the storeroom a rumor sifted through to us that the doctors were in our barrack. Kupferman could no longer move his right arm; we were all being consumed by the lice who were feasting on our festering wounds. I tried to persuade Kupferman to go with me, to try to get to the barrack and obtain medical aid, but he refused.

"You go ahead," he said, "I'll stay here and wait. Someone will come."

Although I realized that he could not move I was unable to help him. I knew nothing would be gained if both of us stayed and perhaps died there so, reluctantly, I went on alone.

I was no longer able to walk and the few hundred yards back to the barrack might as well have been miles. Crawling on the ground, I inched my way painfully along, resting every few minutes. Between the storeroom and the barrack lay a drainage ditch. It was not deep and could have been easily crossed by any one who could walk, but in my condition it presented a real obstacle. When I reached it I turned on my side and rolled down



into it. On the bottom I rested a few minutes, then tried to pull myself up the other side. But, whereas rolling down had been relatively easy, climbing up required the use of muscles I no longer possessed. Hanging on the side of the ditch, tears in my eyes, I called,

"Please, somebody, help me!

There was no one to hear me.

With sudden panic I saw myself dead on the bottom of a drainage ditch in Bergen-Belsen. If that happened, then the Nazis would have finally conquered me after all. Spurred on by the horror of this image I dug my hands deeper into the dirt and calling upon some mysterious reserve of energy somehow dragged myself up and made my way to the barrack door. I remember someone pulling me inside, removing the remnants of my tattered and filthy clothing and wrapping me in a blanket. I was too weak to think or speak coherently; I must have been only semi-conscious all the time. The only thought that flashed through my mind was, "I'm glad I didn't wait."

Someone made some sort of a mark on my forehead and I wondered dreamily if I was being labeled "dead" since I was unable to talk and tell them differently. Then I was loaded on a stretcher and into a Red Cross truck. I half-felt, half-dreamed the movement of the truck, the swaying around curves, and then all went black.

When I awoke a Red Cross nurse was bathing me, cleansing the sores on my body and covering me with a soft powder. I was still lying on a stretcher and struggled to get up. It was useless. She put me in a clean bed and left the room. As soon as



she closed the door I felt another attack of diarrhea coming on. There was no bedpan and I was too weak to call out.

After that I remember nothing except a dream. I dreamed it over and over again. I must have dreamed it many times because I learned later that I was unconscious for two weeks. In my dream I was sitting in the balcony of a theater. On the stage was a huge pudding; in my hand a spoon with a long handle. Over and over I tried to reach that pudding and eat it and over and over I failed.

When I finally awoke I was alone in a white painted room with a window. Outside there was a blue sky and the sun was shining; then the mirage went away and a doctor and a nurse were standing over me. I could feel some water in my left ear but I had no idea what they were doing, nor do I know how they kept me alive during two weeks in a coma. I could hear the doctor say something in a language that sounded like Polish. Then the doctor and nurse went out and a man in a German uniform brought me a tray with food and cigarettes. I ate quickly and vomited it all just as fast. My stomach seemed to have forgotten how to handle real food.

The doctor and nurse returned and took me into another room for x-rays. They asked my name but try as I might I could not form any words. A period of time elapsed, I have no idea how long, and every day the attendant in the Wehrmacht uniform brought me food and cigarettes. As it turned out he was the first person to whom I spoke when I did find my voice again. Anxious to know if he spoke the language I asked him,

"You're German, aren't you?"





He said he was and asked my name. By some curious coincidence, his name was also Bergman. Although I did not really care to form an association with a Wehrmacht officer he was the only company available and I fell into the habit of giving him some of my cigarettes each day. He could just as easily have stolen them off my tray but he waited for me to give them to him instead and I appreciated his unaccustomed decency.

After several more days spent in sleeping and eating several people came in and asked where I was from. I told them that I had been arrested in Holland and so, on that same day I was put on a van with several other patients all bound for Holland. With us were several former soldiers and Red Cross nurses.

Along the way we stopped at a farmhouse. I saw a huge dining hall with all kinds of food on the table. There were many people speaking Dutch, laughing, singing and playing Dutch music. It seemed good to hear the language again. Someone told me that we were in with a group of Dutch civilians who had been taken to Germany as slave laborers. Food was served and someone brought me fresh fruit, a delicacy that I had not eaten since I left Arnhem three years ago. I tried to eat it but couldn't keep it down.

The next day, June 12, 1945, we arrived at our destination, the *Noodziekenhuis* (emergency hospital) at Nijmegen. There I was again bathed, fed and put in a bed. Still I could not keep any food down. In the ward with me were two other Hollanders who had been with our group since we left Laurahütte. One died during the night. I was beginning to wonder if I would starve no matter how much I tried to eat.



Two days after our arrival at Nijmegen we were moved again, this time to a convent. There I learned that I had typhoid fever and malnutrition. The sisters gave me milk five times a day; it was all I could keep down. One day a priest came in and began talking to me about my experiences. He told me God had saved me.

I replied that it was not God but luck - luck and my own determination to live.

He did not return.

Several days later I developed a cramp in my left leg. Unable to shout enough to attract a nurse's attention I told a young Pole in the next bed about my leg and he called the nurse. She took a quick look at the leg and called the doctor. He ordered pillows put under my leg and warned me to lie absolutely still. In order to impress me with the seriousness of his order he explained to me that I had developed thrombosis; a blood clot had formed in my leg and any untoward movement might cause it to move to my heart. I was in terrible pain for three weeks, almost living on aspirin. After lying absolutely stiffly still for that length of time I began to get better. Just as I was looking forward to moving about a little, thrombosis developed in the other leg! Again I had to remain absolutely quiet and feast on aspirin. This time the doctor said it would take at least six weeks before I could move again.

All this time I had not heard from my family or friends. Finally a letter came from Mrs. Moll who had taken us in so long ago when the *Kindertransport* first brought me to Holland. She had obtained my address from a Red Cross list. She sent me the names of the boys and girls from the *Jongenstehuis* who had survived and



also my brother's New York address. I don't know how she found that.

As soon I was able to write I wrote my brother. No answer came. I wrote three more times before receiving an answer. It was in the form of a short note from the island of Guam where he was stationed with the American army. I had not known that there was still a war in the Pacific. The very next day a letter came from a Shirley Bergman in Portland, Oregon. The name meant nothing to me; the city was equally foreign. I asked someone for a map of the United States and looked up Portland, Oregon. Still this meant nothing to me; I had no idea that my brother had left New York several years earlier. He was working in Connecticut until he was drafted. The army had sent him to Portland before he was posted to Guam.

Finally I opened the letter, only mildly interested, until I began reading. It was written in German although it said that it had been translated from the English by a friend for Shirley Bergman, my brother's wife! - who spoke no German. She told me about herself, her family, her marriage to Leo and their plans for my future which of course included bringing me to America as soon as possible. She also wrote that a package was coming to me.

It seemed strange that while real life had stopped for me, my brother had moved, married and become a soldier.

After this the ice seemed broken and I began hearing from more and more relatives. My Aunt Gretel and Uncle Norbert who had waved Good-bye to me at the railroad station in Vienna so very long ago were now in London. The other uncles wrote from New York. My mother's other brother, Bernard, had also managed to get



out of Austria. All said they were sending packages. Most of these did not reach me until after my release from the hospital.

Now visitors began arriving also. First Mary Loewenkopf and Gerhard Perl from the *Jongenstehuis* came. They had seen my name on a Red Cross list also. Both of them had returned to Arnhem, only a few miles distant. They were followed by Fred Clipper and my former employer, Clara Gans. All of them stayed only minutes. Later Clara told me that I looked so terrible they could not bear it. I believed her; at that time I weighed eighty pounds, sixty pounds below my normal weight, two of my front teeth were missing and I was squinting from being without glasses so long. No one could have found me a very cheering sight.

Clara did stay long enough to tell me that she and her husband had also been in camps, (Majdenek and Treblinka) that he was probably dead but she was again living in a house in Arnhem and I was welcome to come and stay there after my release. She, however, did not expect to be at home since she was engaged in searching through Holland for her two children who had been placed with non-Jewish foster families during the war years. She had the foresight to let me know that her neighbor would let me in and give me food until she returned.

It was fortunate that I did have at least this promise of a home. A week or so after Clara's visit a Red Cross agent came in and asked me where I wanted to go. I told him I had no family but mentioned that I had some friends in Arnhem. He gave me one outfit of clothes, no money and no food rationing card, and then took me to Arnhem, dropping me off in front of Clara's house.

For the first time since I left Vienna on the





*Kindertransport* I was utterly alone.

I knocked on Clara's door but as she had predicted she was not home. I had no desire to go to the neighbor whom I did not know, explain who I was, etc. For a moment I was tempted to turn away and walk down the street looking for I knew not what. Only the fact that my legs would not support me kept me from wandering off. It was all I could do to hobble painfully to the neighbor's door. She was a kindly Dutch woman who asked no questions but gave me food and the key to Clara's house.

For several days I stayed alone in Clara's deserted house, doing nothing but sitting by the window, watching the people of Arnhem going about their business. Twice a day I went to the neighbor for my meals. Then packages began arriving from my family in England and America and I ate and smoked their contents. Finally the food was staying down.

After about a week of this aimless existence I decided that I must do something about obtaining a ration card. Food was still scarce in Holland and it was not fair to the kind people who were feeding me to use their rations. Since I knew nothing of the necessary procedure I set out to find my friend Gerhard Perl to ask for help. By walking very slowly and resting very often I managed to get to his house and obtain the necessary information. Getting back, however, was another story. My strength had been used up; after I had taken only a few steps I realized that I would never get home without help. Gerhard gave me a cane to help me walk but even this was not enough. Finally he loaded me on the handlebars of his bicycle and half rode, half pushed me back to Clara's house. It was he who finally got my ration card for me.



A few days later Clara returned. She had her daughter Julie with her but was still looking for her son Jackie. She had learned only that he had been mistreated by one family with whom he had lived and had been moved several times. She stayed home only a few days during which time we exchanged no more than a dozen sentences; neither of us cared to talk about the bitter experiences behind us. After that she left again, taking Julie with her, and I went back to taking my meals with her neighbor.

For days I continued sitting in that chair by the window thinking over the past three years. I thought of the dead and the presumed dead: Dr. Wolff, Arthur Gerechter, Robert Hajek, the young Russian boy hanged at Laurahütte, the young Hollander who died at Nijmegen, the thousands of nameless bodies in that pit at Bergen-Belsen. Did Joe Kupferman make it? I thought of those who would still die because medical help was not coming fast enough or because they were beyond it. I thought of the Nazis who tried to annihilate us, and almost succeeded with the help of the factory owners who used us as slave labor; the farmers who sold the rotten turnips and potatoes to the concentration camps; the railroads, all the government agencies, the suppliers of goods and, most of all, an acquiescent civilian population.

I thought of all of us who, although we were still living, had died inside. I seemed to be incapable of the normal human emotions of desire, anger and pity. Having struggled so long to keep a spark of life burning I felt drained of everything except the ability to breathe, eat and sleep. I wondered if the Nazis had not done their work well after all; if those of us who had survived physically had not become *Muselmänner* emotionally.



Perhaps it was this thought that made me determined to rally my remaining energies and find a new life. I tried to think of Arnhem as I had known and loved it before the war; a city full of charm, friendliness, gaiety. I reminded myself that I was lucky to be here and not alone in some strange city where I knew no one. At least, I thought, I am among people I know. I have friends here now, I can speak the language. Marshalling once more the strengths that had helped me to survive the three grueling years I turned my back on the world of the dying and began the search for a new life.



## EPILOGUE

One of my first acts in civilian life was to attempt to get some information about my parents. I wrote to the *Polizeibüreau* in Vienna and after some time received an answer saying only that their records showed that both my parents had been deported (evidently together) in June 1942 to Minsk, Russia. Most of the deported from Vienna to Minsk were shot on their arrival. Since no word had been heard about my parents since their deportation they could be presumed dead. Much later my niece was able to get the official reports. They had been transported "with transport 26, number 137 and 138 on September 6, 1942 to Minsk - Maly Tostinec." According to the report most of the people were shot after arriving in the forest of Maly - Trostinec. About 10,000 Austrian Jews were deported there and only eight or ten survived.

My parents had been murdered before I even left the Netherlands.

Some of my aunts and uncles had managed to escape but my parents apparently never even tried. Why not? It may have been that they, like so many others, thought that they weren't important enough to bother with. They were poor, living on a government pension that wasn't cut off. People like Leo's Nazi friend, Karl Victor, were kind to them. Before they were deported they had only one brush with the authorities. This information came from my Aunt Gretel. I was already gone when it happened.





My mother had cancer of the kidneys. She had already had one removed and was still very weak. The laundry was always hung out on the roof to dry but my mother couldn't manage to carry it up there so she hired a laundress who came every two weeks.

The laundress decided to denounce my parents to the Nazis; who knows why. She told them that the Bergmanns were rich Jews, hiding money from them. An officer came around and questioned the Christian concierge who told him that my parents were as poor as everyone else. Later, either he or another officer came to take my mother for forced work in the city, but when he realized how feeble she was, he let her go home.

So, ironically, it may have been the kindness of individuals that gave my parents a false belief that they could ride out the storm.

Naturally, I was also curious about the fate of others, both friend and foe, who had shared my life during the past seven years. Gradually and through various channels I began to get news from and about most of them.

I learned that Dr. Wolff had remained in Westerbork for about a year. Somehow he managed to get on a transport to Theresienstadt where he had hoped to find his mother. She was already dead, however, and when he was put on another transport to a camp in Poland he availed himself of the poison tablets he always had with him to end his life. His mother was dead, he had reason to suppose that his only sister and niece had met a similar fate, his nephew was safe in Israel, his



"children" scattered. He could do no more for any of them and none of them could help him. His resistance broken, he at least cheated the Nazis out of the pleasure of killing him

Miss Hedi Sussman, to whom I am indebted for much of this information, spent the war years underground, under an assumed identity. Although the Gestapo suspected her and watched her continuously, she managed to avoid arrest. She died in the 1970s in Bussum in a nursing home.

Herr Locker, the orthodox *Jugendleiter* of the *Jongenstehuis*, also went underground during the war. Later he and his family emigrated to Israel, where he became leader of a Kibbutz. His wife manages the household while he teaches. He, at any rate, attained his goal.

Dr. Felsenthal, the home's other *Jugendleiter*, fled from Arnhem, somehow managed to get to Belgium but was arrested there and died in a concentration camp. His family is in Holland.

Frieda Leib, the *Jongenstehuis*' popular cook, gave way under the strain of Nazi persecution. As soon as the home received its notice to vacate she began looking for an underground hiding place but was unsuccessful. Several days before the deadline for leaving the *Jongenstehuis*, Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman found her in her room, dying of a large dose of poison. Several doctors, including Dr. Wolff, tried vainly to revive her. She left a letter to her parents and sisters saying that, for her, there was no other alternative

Zuster van Cleef was also interred at Westerbork, remained there until 1945 and continued living in Holland and



working as a social worker.

SS-Obersturmführer Gemmeker, Kommandant of Westerbork, was sentenced in Assen to ten years in prison.

Mevrouw Moll continued to take an active part in the lives of the *Jongenstehuis* group after the war. For many years she compiled annual lists of all its members' current addresses. In her last letter (1955) she announced that she was retiring from this endeavor at the age of seventy-five, sent her last list, complete with current news items, and her heartiest wishes for the future welfare of the young people whom she, together with Dr. Wolff and Miss Sussman, had come to regard as "theirs." Mevrouw Moll was part invalid and lived in The Hague on a government pension until her death.

Of the one hundred and seventy-one boys and girls from the *Jongenstehuis* and the *Huis ten Vrouwen*, seventy are known to have survived the war. These are scattered throughout Holland, Belgium, England, Canada, the United States, Israel and South America.

Frieda Komornik, the girl in Auschwitz who spoke to me from the window of Block 10, the medical experiments barrack for women, came back to Amsterdam and died two years later. I never got in touch with her, by telephone or letter, because I did not want to know what the Nazis did to her.

Joe Kupferman was picked up by the Red Cross the day after I left Bergen-Belsen, suffering from acute typhoid. He spent two months in an emergency hospital, then three months in Paris before he was returned to Belgium. There he was reunited with his wife and son and eventually resumed his



occupation as diamond broker. He too has helped me recall forgotten names and incidents. The last time I heard from him in a letter it was through his son who wrote to me that his father became blind and wouldn't be able to answer my letters. Of the others in the group in Laurahütte, Bash went back to Czechoslovakia, the fate of the Priest and the Communist leader is unknown.

Dr. Arthur Lehman, a former administrator of Camp Vught, my onetime partner in the *Schreibstube* at Laurahütte, emigrated to Los Angeles where he died in the 1960s. From him I heard that *Oberscharführer* Quackernack was sentenced to death at a trial in Hamelen and executed in October 1948. *Schreiber* Grande testified against him. Grande himself became an important official in Hannover of an organization set up for the rehabilitation of former occupants of German concentration camps. He always knew what side his bread was buttered on.

I have no information what happened to the *Lagerälteste* and the *Läufer* Jacoby.

My brother's friend, Karl Victor, who had joined the Nazi party, was taken prisoner by the Russians and eventually released; he came back to Vienna, where Leo visited him a couple of times. They remained friends.

Clara Gans, after locating her son and daughter, brought both children back to Arnhem, and slowly began rebuilding her husband's business. I remained with her until June 1947 when all the visas, affidavits and passport were finally in order and I was ready to come to the United States. During the





nearly two years I spent in Arnhem after the war I worked as a teller in a bank, endorsing coupons issued by the Dutch government to citizens who had suffered losses of property and personal possessions during the war. The coupons entitled them to purchase items as needed but had to be endorsed by the bank.

Clara Gans, a chain smoker, died in 1991 of emphysema in Arnhem.

After leaving Holland I spent a month in New York with an aunt and uncle. Another aunt and uncle had gone to Holland to find me; we crossed paths in mid-ocean. Deciding that I would like to see my brother again after a nine-year separation, I came to Portland, Oregon, in July 1947. Not being able to read or speak English, I made my way across the continent on the train largely with the help of gesticulation and an understanding porter.

Once in Portland, with my brother Leo acting as interpreter, I obtained employment as an artist with a display advertising firm.

In 1954 I met my wife, Elizabeth, (nee Kalisher) at the Portland Friendship Club when she came to watch her father perform in one of the *Bunte Abende* skits. In 1958 we went back to Vienna. Her family also came from there but they were able to reach America, through France, in 1939. I went to the *Jüdische Kultusgemeinde*, which had kept records of Jewish deportation. They told me that both my parents were sent to Minsk. That was all they knew. I found out no more until my niece found the records office.



My wife and I have two daughters. The eldest Ann was born April 23, 1959, with Down Syndrome. We discovered later that my experience during the war had caused chromosomal damage. We then adopted another daughter, Mimi.

When Ann was born, the first thought that came into my mind was the image of those mentally handicapped people who were on the train with us to Auschwitz. They were so bewildered and frightened. No one was there to help them. While they were waiting to be sent to the showers, they would sink down against a wall and rock all the while moaning or crying. It was heartbreaking. Once when we were at a concert with Ann she sat down against the wall like that. At that time I didn't know what she was doing; all I knew was that the flashback to those pathetic children was absolutely shattering. Later we learned that she had a heart condition and that sitting or crouching relieved pain!

Ann still lives with us at home. There was no way I could trust her safety to an institution after seeing what happened to those poor people.

After we returned from Europe in 1958 I went to work for the Oregon State Department of Transportation as an assistant model builder. Oregon was at that time involved in constructing a complex system of bridges and freeways. The models were used to assist the engineers and to settle right-of-way disputes. When the Chief Model Builder retired, I took over his job and stayed there until I retired in 1984. I still enjoy art and especially craft projects. I recently made a stained glass chandelier for our dining room.



For a long time I was mainly concerned with rebuilding my life. But, eventually, I decided that it was time to tell others what had happened to me. Events in the world made me realize that persecution and genocide weren't things of the past. I felt that I had to speak out against discrimination against any group. Sometimes that means defending the civil rights of people whose values and ideals are repugnant to you. No one has the right to decide who is and who isn't entitled to humane treatment - with the flick of a finger. Democracy - - and civilization -- depend on our respect for the rights of others. Those of us who have experienced the most extreme violation of these basic rights have an obligation to spread the word: "Don't take your rights for granted: they can be stolen and destroyed."

So, many years after I came to Portland, I began to speak to community groups and students about my experience. I think it's important that people realize that this could happen to them, to anyone. I'm not a hero. I wasn't interested in politics or religion. I was an ordinary boy from an ordinary family. I liked movies and sports. I wanted to be an artist.

Whenever I talk to high school groups I remind them that I was just their age. "I was fifteen when I was sent away, " I tell them. "How would you feel? Can you imagine what you would have done?" They listen. Many times both children and adults ask me, "How did you survive? What was your strength?" First of all I tell them, "Luck." I don't know what luck means but it's the first thing that comes into my mind. I was lucky.





Secondly, I believe that I adapted because I had friends. The support of friends kept me going. Without that support, I might have forgotten that I ever had another life, that I ever knew anyone decent. In the brief moments we had, we talked together. We talked about politics in general, about what was going to happen to us if we got out, what movies we had seen, books we had read, concerts we had been to, events from the real world, the sane one. The only subject we tried to avoid was the one we thought about most - our families; that was too painful. But everything else. That was what kept us alive and gave us the will to survive another day.

But if the Nazi officer had flicked his finger in the direction of the 'showers' at Auschwitz, if the bombs had landed on my train or the factory at Hannover, if I had gone a few more days without food or medical attention, then all the determination in the world would not have saved me. Luck was with me. It deserted so many others.

We, the survivors, will always ask the question, what if....?

All of us feel a part of history...





#### ADDENDUM

Jacques Bergman died in 2001 of prostate cancer. He was 80 years old.

Ann Bergman died in 2003 of cyanotic heart disease. She was 43 years old. Her father's death was very hard for her.

Leo Bergman died in 2005 of ALS. He was 85 years old. He missed his brother very much.

All of the aunts and uncles mentioned in this memoir have also died since this book was written.

